

1.

Seng Nu could have taken any fruit from this tree, but the most difficult one to reach would taste the sweetest. She outstretched her arms to keep balance as she walked along the branch, rocking and bouncing her body to match the wind that was flying and knotting itself around the trunks and branches of the upper canopy. Down on the ground, a squirrel imagined he saw the upper levels of the apple tree on fire. It was just Seng Nu's hair, long and unnaturally red, billowing out behind her.

Last summer she had swum against the river from the curve to the old bridge and in the cold season just passed she had scrambled to the summit the eastern mountain in two days. All by herself. Always by herself.

"I found you on a peapod, sitting on a vine". That was what Lum Naw had always told her.

Today, the challenge she had set herself was to pluck this apple. It was on branch so high that the fruit itself poked above the forest canopy, as if it was trying to see further than all the others.. Seng Nu looked down for a moment and the ground seemed as far away as the horizon, but she had no fear of hurting herself if she fell. She stretched an arm up but the apple was just out of reach and she could only graze it with her fingers. She would have to move closer. Her legs were already committed to the next step when she heard the roar. It distracted her balance and she wobbled hopelessly for a brief moment. And then she was off, falling from the very top of the forest to the earth below.

A bed of leaves and branches rose up from the ground to catch her. They were soft and springy and she bounced as she fell into them. They floated her down to the forest floor and then collapsed as she stepped off onto solid ground. She brushed herself off and looked up to see the apple smirking at her.

She heard the roar again.

It was coming from far away in the forest, but seemed to be getting nearer. She supposed that all beastly roars were sign of danger, but this one had seemed more dangerous than most, like a knife with serrated edges.

Seng Nu began running to meet the sound.

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Jin Bu's forefinger stroked Zaw's palm, as they walked through the forest, feeling her way along the dry riverbeds of his skin. "Your hands have become rough."

“That is what happens when you work around elephants” said Zaw. “When you pull ropes and chains all day, your hide becomes as tough and cracked as theirs.”

“And what will happen to your nose?”

Zaw reached up and gently tweaked Jin Bu’s own nose between his thumb and forefinger. “It will grow long, almost as big as yours.”

Jin Bu slapped him playfully on the chest, frowning in mock indignation. Then she stopped, letting go of Zaw’s hand and reaching up to touch her face in actual concern. “Is my nose really that big?”

Zaw laughed. “I’m just joking with you Jin Bu! Your nose is perfectly normal sized. It’s smaller than an elephant’s and larger than a dormouse’s.”

Jin Bu wrinkled her nose and took Zaw’s hand in hers again. “You should dip your hands in honey, that’s a good way to stop them from being so cracked.”

“And what would the men on camp say if they saw me walking around with honey on my hands like a bear raiding a beehive?”

“They’d say ‘what soft hands that young man has’ and give you a promotion!” Jin Bu skipped ahead and let her hands skim through the lowest hanging leaves. She looked like a mere sapling as she bounced among the old forest. She was slender and her skin was the light brown of trees not yet turned twenty. Her hair was dark and hung loose down her back so when she jumped it bounced and dropped like a waterfall.

“If only it were that simple, It’ll be a year at least before I get to try out as a full oozie.” Unlike Jin Bu, Zaw was no willow, but had grown wider and bulkier with his work in the forest at Bittersweet Camp. Like a mature teak tree, he was sturdy enough to lean against, which was Jin Bu often did as they walked, her head resting on his shoulder as they strolled in perfect time with each other. His hair was almost as long as hers, but he had learned to tie it up after finding out the hard way that the forest was home to many sticky and thorny things that loved to betangle it.

Jin Bu stopped jumping and looked back at him “And then what will you do?” her voice dipped and rose in a singsong voice as she asked the question. She had asked it many times before, and never grew tired of the answer she knew was coming.

Zaw knew his part and he too spoke with an slightly exaggerated lilt in his voice, as if he was a player on a stage. “And then I’ll save up jade for a few years and ride into town on a bull elephant and carry you off to the mountains where we’ll live like bandits!” With a last flourish, he lifted her up by the waist and spun her around on his shoulders as she squealed.

They were both old children now, close to their eighteenth year, but they still spoke lightly of the future. To talk about it seriously would mean confronting the law of The Valley, which said that there was no alignment for marriage between a woman from Jin Bu's clan and a man from Zaw's. So they had become a secret growing into each other, meeting deep in the forest between Buttersweet and Blackstone village. The future they spoke of, in practised voices, was not a lie, but it was a story they told themselves to force away what loomed.

"Do you think the birds care for who they marry?" They reached the curve in the stream where the water was at its shallowest. There was a hint of urgency in Zaw's voice, as though they might both grow old the second he crossed the water and headed back to camp.

"Oh so I am a bird am I?" Jin Bu replied playfully, trying to steer the conversation away from the edge, "A little sparrow who fell into your hands? Perhaps you should have let me go and waited for a sunbird or a peacock instead."

"Yes a little sparrow...with not much meat on the bones." Zaw teased.

Jin Bu punched him lightly on the shoulder. "I thought the Tairu were good hunters."

"We are!" said Zaw, puffing his chest out. "But the best hunters are not only concerned with the amount of meat, but the taste too."

Jin Bu spun around to face Zaw and stood on her tip toes, her hands resting on his forearms and brought her face up to his. "And how do I taste?"

Zaw looked at her for a while, trying his best to make a memory of the outline of her face, curving like a upright mango or a falling raindrop. Then he leaned in for a kiss and she closed her eyes in assent, but he tilted his head at the last moment to lightly take the lobe of her left ear between his teeth.

"Hey!" shouted Jin Bu, her face flushed, a little louder than she wanted to and then jumped as a pair of startled pigeons took off from a nearby tree, their wings beating like drumrolls. She was tense, like a deer who hears a unseen footstep. Neither of them wanted to explain to anyone what they were doing in the forest together.

Dampened voices seemed to be coming from further down the stream. Zaw cocked his head to hear them and decided they weren't so near he needed to move quickly, but they were near enough for him to leave. "I better go for now."

Jin Bu nodded and their hands ran down each other's arms as they walked away from each other, until only the fingertips touched and then finally separated.

Earlier that Morning.

Pinkwetha was sure it wasn't his birthday. But he did not think too long about pesky things such as reasons when Jakan and Sutring came to him that morning with an entire branch of bananas, flower and all, and a stack of juicy yellow persimmons. Danh arrived too, and began to massage his shoulder muscles as he ate out of the other's hands. He could tell from the slightly musty smell that the bananas had been cut the night before but he didn't mind as they were still deliciously squidgy and the persimmons were a type he had never tasted before, a treat in itself. They were so sweet he took a leisurely time with each one, sucking them clean to the skin. He didn't notice that with each mouthful, Jakan and Sutring were taking a step back and he was stepping forward with his greed leading him to the next bite. Danh walked alongside, patting and rubbing him in encouragement as his hands kneaded the thick ropes of sinewy muscle in Pinkwetha's back.

He was still a teenager and not yet a full worker, so occasionally he might help with portering pots and pans back and forth from the camp to the forest, but he could not really complain of a sore muscles at his age like his uncles did. But he was enjoying the feeling so much he did not stop to wonder why he was being treated so kindly. Perhaps it was his birthday after all, though he remembered his seventeenth had been a rainy one and today the air was hot and the sky was cloudless and blue.

The two men who had been carrying fruit suddenly jumped up and climbed over a short bamboo fence. Pinkwetha could not go forward and there were fences at his sides too. He turned his head to ask Danh for help but Danh had gone and when he tried to walk back he found that a gate had been shut against his rear and he was pinned in tight like a stone in a mango. They had led him into a pen. Betrayal clouded the air like thick pollen as more familiar faces appeared through the gaps in the bamboo, apologies falling from their mouths but an unmistakable mirth in their eyes. And then came the ultimate indignation.

He had grown up in a camp where all his aunties and uncles had carried the men to and from the forest to collect fallen trees, but he had still not been prepared for the sheer humiliation of a man sitting on his back for the first time. To make things worse it had been young Jakan, who he had known since they were both children, who made the first attempt to ride him. Pinkwetha had bucked and writhed in a fury, rolling his body from side to side in a rage, trying to shake Jakan off. Pinkwetha was so tightly caught in the pen he could not look up but in front of him he saw a group of men tugging a rope that went up into the trees and realised that Jakan was on the other end of the rope and they were lifting him up to safety each time he bucked. He had no space to charge but he bent his neck and began to butt the sides of the pen.

Over and over again he butted the fence, no longer caring about the man sitting on his back. Soon enough, there was a cracking sound as one stick of bamboo, just a little thinner than the rest, snapped. Pinkwetha continued to headbutt the fence, breaking more sticks, giving himself more room for the final charge. He was the river and the cage was a failing dam. The smirks on the men's faces were beginning to sink into frowns of concern. They had already started running to the huts as he dug his small tusks into the final gaps and then with a sudden jerk, twisted his head, crushing the

sticks against each other and shattering the cage wall. Pinkwetha ran out in a rage and kicked his back legs as he broke free from the pen. The men had all disappeared, except Jakan who had been left dangling in the air high above the pen, with a pathetic pleading expression on his face. He was too high to reach so Pinkwetha ran towards the forest into the forest.

As he charged out of the camp he passed a grove of bananas and recalled the now tainted memory of this morning's breakfast. The tricks of men! He was hungry for nothing but destruction and even the trees seemed to tilt out of his way to clear a path for him as he charged through the forest in a rage that blanketed his senses. He let out a warning roar that sounded like strangled thunder. All he saw, heard and felt was anger.

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The vines were whipping around his legs but they could not hold Zaw back. He moved so fast his feet seemed to be skimming over the surface of the forest floor, which has been flattened by the beast he was chasing. When he had arrived back to the camp he had seen the smashed wood and the slightly sheepish expression of the men who shrugged their shoulders when he asked them which way the elephant had gone.

He knew Pinkwetha well and on a normal day could have tracked the young elephant based on footprints alone, but this was not a normal day and it was not difficult to see where he was going, he ran past crushed hedgerows and thin trees bent at unnatural angles. Even the elder, larger trees had wounds to their bark, bleeding with sap, where Pinkwetha had scraped past them on his rampage. His heart filled with dread each time the trail turned, as it seemed like cruel chance that Pinkwetha was charging towards the one place in this whole wide forest Zaw didn't want him to. The grove by the apple tree, where he knew Jin Bu would be collecting gourd leaves.

He reached the grove just as Pinkwetha smashed himself into the base of the apple tree's base. To Zaw's dismay he saw Jin Bu was in the tree, clinging to a higher branch. Pinkwetha had spotted her and was trying to bring the whole tree down. The tree was still standing for now but he'd seen elephants this size bring down ones much bigger.

Pinkwetha turned and trotted back to the far side of the grove. Zaw ran to the tree, knowing that the elephant was returning. The young elephant did not have any grudge against Jin Bu, in the state that he was in he was directing his anger and revenge against any human he could find.

"Zaw!" shouted Jin Bu as she saw him.

Pinkwetha was across the grove and had turned back to face the apple tree again.

"Hold on! He's coming back". Zaw turned waved his hands as the young elephant prepared it's charge, stomping it's feet and snorting steam from it's nostrils. "Hey big butt! Come on I'm here!" he yelled at Pinkwetha and ran away from the tree.

Pinkwetha did not see him and bent his head down to charge again. Zaw shouted, jumped and waved but finally had to leap out of the way as the bull smashed into the tree. There was a deep boom of impact and then a cracking sound as the tree's base began to cleave in two. Jin Bu's felt the world stumble as the branch she was wrapped around tilted and began to swing,

Zaw knew from looking at the tree that it would only take one more hit before it fell and sent Jin Bu falling to the ground. Pinkwetha had walked back through the grove and let out an ear-drenching battle wail as he turned around again. Zaw ran again, this time directly at the elephant, shouting and jumping, trying to make his body wide. This time Pinkwetha saw him. Zaw caught the flash in his eyes and quickly skipped to the side and ran. He looked back to see Pinkwetha was now following him. He felt relief to know that Jin Bu would now have time to get down from the tree and to safety. But now he had put himself in danger.

"Run away!" he shouted to Jin Bu, without looking back as he ran from the grove with the angry elephant close behind him. He ran through the forest jumping over roots and looping around trees. Zaw could not beat the elephant in a straight race, but he could try to use his relative nimbleness to make it difficult. He didn't need to look back to know that the elephant was still following, as he could hear the sounds of feet thumping like drums on the ground and the wails of the elephant pierced his ears. They reached a thicket of bamboo and Zaw tried to weave a pattern through them to slow Pinkwetha down, but the young elephant simply smashed his way through. Zaw knew he could not keep this up for much longer and he looked for a tree to climb and then realised this would put him in the same trapped position as Jin Bu. His thoughts were cut short as the elephant's head rammed into his back, and then he felt a tear as one of the stubby sharp tusks pierced his legs. The elephant shook his head and Zaw felt the bones in his leg break as if they were sticks of bamboo in a poorly built fence. He fell to the ground and could not get up. Pinkwetha knew Zaw, but he had been blinded by his anger and only saw prey. He screamed in victory, and the horrible note of death hung in the air as he lifted his leg over Zaw's prone body for the killing crush.

"HEY!"

Faster than wildfire a shape flew out of the trees. Pinkwetha seemed stunned and looked to see where the sound was coming from, his right leg still hovering in the air above Zaw.

"MOVE!" said the figure and Zaw, understanding that this was a command to him rather than the elephant, gritted his teeth in pain as he rolled out from under the elephant's foot. The shape came into view above him.

It was a girl. Zaw saw she was around the same age as him and was surprised not to recognise her. With dark skin the colour of upturned earth, and hair like embers she was like a flaming torch as she jumped from tree to tree with a gliding, spinning grace. With a twist and a flip she landed on her feet in front of the elephant. "COME ON!"

Zaw, who could barely stand let alone walk, was about to respond that he could barely stand let alone walk when he realised that the girl was addressing the elephant. Pinkwetha looked at the girl and then down to see the empty ground where Zaw had been and let out another rage filled cry, and bounded towards the girl, who did not seem worried at all.

She jumped back and grabbed the trunk of a birch tree with both hands and swung her body around. Zaw watched in disbelief as she bent her knees, and bringing her feet up to the trunk, pushed off with a kick that brought the entire tree crashing down on the enraged elephant who collapsed under its weight.

The girl immediately went over to check on the elephant, who was now lying defeated but calm under the broken tree. She stroked the thick hide of his head and whispered something in his ears. As she stood up Pinkwetha was already asleep. Zaw had been in unfeeling shock but pain surged through his leg and back as his body remembered he had just been run over by an elephant. He groaned and the girl looked back at him as if she had forgot he was there.

She scampered over and ripped his shirt so she could tie a bandage around his bleeding leg. She worked with careful, measured determination. By the time she had finished tying the wound shut, Zaw's eyes had already closed.

Seng Nu looked at the unconscious body and watched his naked chest rising and falling with ragged uneven breaths. Then it slowed and settled into a shallow rhythm. She blushed, thought the forest was the only witness. Then she scolded herself for wasting time. The boy was not safe yet and needed to be taken to the camp.

As she lifted the body she spoke to him, confident that he would not reply. "My name's Seng Nu, I was tracking this elephant all morning. He got you in the leg pretty bad, so I'm going to take you back to the camp now"

They were the first words she had spoken to another human for six years.

2.

Seng Nu had arrived in the forest ten years ago, when she was around seven, maybe eight, years old, a late age for first memories. Her first one was of how dark the forest was. Her second was the ogre. It had sunken eyes as dim as candles in fog and smiled as if smiling was something it had only heard about in stories but never actually seen another person do to them. It's mouth did not have teeth in number or sharpness to eat her whole, but the rows of thick yellow nubs could probably give her a good chew. Her third memory was not an image but a feeling: the rushing sense of calm on realising that it wasn't an ogre at all, but an old lady who walked with a hunch and whose headshawl drew long deceptive shadows across her face. "Eat" said the woman, placing a bowl of pumpkin leaf soup on the table in front of her. And Seng Nu ate, her legs swinging off the chair, high above the floor.

She did not know where she came from or how ended up in the forest by Lum Naw's house. She knew how to speak and use a spoon, so probably wasn't raised by wolves or tigers, but by other people, in a place where the trees didn't grow so closely together to block out the sun. She knew what an ogre was too and always felt ashamed of her first reaction to Lum Naw. An ogre was a horrible thing, something big, hot and nasty. Lum Naw was small warm and lovely.

By the time Lum Naw passed away, Seng Nu was old enough to look after herself. In the afternoons, she roamed the jungle herself, finding new flowers that not even Lum Naw had seen before and climbing up the inside of waterfalls and through caves untrodden for ten thousand years. She could lift herself up into a tree with her arms alone. And though she could not run as fast as the forest deer or keep up with the falcons flying overhead, she could outrun the wild boars and chase sparrows until they were exhausted.

As she approached the entrance way to the camp, she let Zaw's body gently come down to the ground. No one was at the gate, but there was a metal bell set into a tree with a wooden mallet resting in a pocket strap that had been tied around the trunk. She hit the bell three times, jumping at the clang and then ran behind a tree to watch.

A man came out and looked around and for a frustrating long period of time, he gazed up and outwards into the forest, his mouth slightly open in confusion, as though he was expecting a bird to fly down and ring the bell again. Eventually he noticed Zaw lying on the road in front of him and after another long pause, he ran back to the camp to get help.

Four men came this time, carrying a stretcher made from bamboo and banana leaves. They loaded Zaw onto it, but as he did, the bandage around his leg caught on a unpolished nub of wood and began to loosen.

Seng Nu wanted nothing more than to run back to her cottage in the forest. But the same voice that had told her to carry this boy back to the camp was now telling her that if she left now, he would die at the hands of these incompetents.

She took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the tree, ready to tie the wound shut again.

And if she got to see the beautiful boy up close again, well that would be a good thing too.

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Jin Bu climbed down from the tree and wiped her palms against her dress. She had been gripping the tree so hard her palms had scratched and bled against the rough bark. trying to find Zaw. It wasn't clever, she told herself, trying to follow an elephant that had been trying to kill you.

She was at the crossing by the now leaning and battered, apple tree. South led back to Blackstone village while North and across the stream went to the Elephant Camp, which they called Bittersweet. She had never been there before even though it was close to the village. "Not a place for young women" her mother had said when she had once asked to go see the elephants. "Don't you dare go anywhere near there" her father had growled, displacing and overruling her mother's warning with an strict order.

She heard his voice in her head, telling her to go straight home now. But he was muted by an image of Zaw, running into the trees. He had saved her life. She had to know if he was ok. What was she supposed to do, go home and make soup?

She took a step but then immediately threw herself into the bracken by the side of the path as she heard a wail coming from behind.

“HROOONN!”

Jin Bu felt her heart jump again at the sound of another elephant and she crouched under a arch of thick bramble by the side of the road and curled herself in a ball. She looked down the pathway and sighed in relief to see that it wasn't the same beast that had chased her earlier. This was one much larger and did not appear to be on a mad rampage, instead it was ambling slowly up the pathway, pausing every now and again to take a breath.

“WATCH OUT!” said the elephant as it came past her. Jin Bu scrambled to her feet and realised that the voice had come from a man who was sat on the elephant's back. His face was smooth like polished copper, but his hair was dashed with streaks of grey the same colour as the light underbelly of the elephant he was riding.

“Watch out little mouse!” he said as the elephant paused beside the bramble. “I won't try to step on you myself but Chyarmanine here just wants to get home and rest and she won't stop now for anyone but me” he said, gently patting Chyarmanine's head. Jin Bu saw that he was sitting on a small leather saddle strapped to the elephant's back and there were metal chains which ran behind where they looped around a huge log of teak wood. With a quiet grunt, the elephant started to move again and the as she dragged the log, it sent dust up from the path. Jin Bu quickly decided that she did not want to go back through the dust cloud, so she walked alongside the elephant, doing her best to keep up.

“What's a girl like you doing out here then? Are you off to the camp? ” he asked but his smile dropped as he saw her more clearly. More than the rips in her clothing or the cuts on her arms it was the stumbling, lost expression on her face which told him something was not right.

“Come on, looks like you need to rest your feet. I'll take you to the camp.” He unrolled a bundle of sticks by his stirrups with sent a thin wooden ladder down the elephant's side. As she climbed up, he offered his hand and felt the cuts in her palms.

“What happened girl?”

Jin Bu hid her eyes. “I was in the forest collecting leaves”

“Collecting leaves? Whatever for?”

“The wild ones taste better.”

“Well that’s true enough, but it looks like you got into a fight with more than a prickly vine.”

“An elephant chased me...I climbed a tree to escape and Zaw chased it away. I came here to see if he’s all right.”

“You’re a friend of Zaw’s are you? I’ve been out in the forest this morning so I don’t know what’s been going on, but I suppose they were going to kheddar young Pinkwetha this morning, maybe that was the young bull that chased you. I suppose he must have broken loose. I told them they were taking too long. You see Pinkwetha was a wild elephant first, he wasn’t raised in the camp. You always take a risk trying to train wild elephants. But Zaw is a good young man and strong too, he isn’t the fastest, for sure, but he has a good mind on him. He will have taken that elephant on a little chase around the trees I’m sure.”

Jin Bu felt herself nodding although she wasn’t sure if she believed it, or it was just an involuntary response to the swaying and bumping of Chyarmanine’s walk. Maybe she was worrying too much about Zaw. Elephants must break free all the time. They might turn into the camp and find him back at work already. Then she would look a fool.

Everytime the elephant had dragged the log it’s own distance, she would pause for a quick break, sometimes unrolling her long trunk and poking it into the leafs and branches by the side of the road. She would grab and pull on a leafy branch and then chew it as she took off again.

“I’m Zami Kon of Blackstone” said the man, introducing himself during one of these stops.

“I’m Hkanna Jin Bu of Blackstone too” said Jin Bu, who was gripping the saddle of the elephant almost as tight as she had grabbed the tree earlier.

“I thought I recognised you” said Kon, with a slight hesitancy in his voice “You’re Gum Taw’s child.”

Hkanna Gum Taw was not just the patriarch of the Hkanna clan, but headman of the village and a renowned warrior in the valley. He had made his name leading the Army of the Valley on three successful wars against the Mountain Clans and while he was too old to command men into battle, as head man of Blackstone village he still carried the responsibility for mustering should the Army of the Valley call. The forest elephant camp was also in his domain and he collected a yearly sum from the sale of the timber, though he rarely if ever visited, delegating the management to his brother-in-law.

His four children would have denied that having a headman for a father had made them spoiled; they had grown up working in the family farm just as other children in the village did. Yet at times it

was difficult for them to feel the same as everyone else. While the family farm was no bigger than others in the village, the income from the elephant camp meant the Hkannas could put more food into the family pot. Low harvest years in the valley bred lean people, but the Hkanna children had never wanted and had grown tall and firm like flowers in well-tended pots of rich earth. On feast days, the whole village would congregate in open space and the Hkanna clan sat at the centre table to be served first, with Gum Taw taking the first cuts of thigh meat as was the headman's right. Sometimes he would peel strips off the meat and give it to his children, who couldn't help but feel that they were also receiving portions of the reverence the rest of the village gave him. Jin Bu, as the youngest, often was the last to get any cut-offs if she got any at all and this was probably why she had grown up more careless of the clan traditions and ceremony which said that her and Zaw could not be together.

Jin Bu wondered if Kon would tell her father about her and Zaw. When she had said how Zaw had saved her, he had smiled as though to say he would keep their secret safe. She tried to change the subject.

“Where are you taking this timber Brother? I thought that the camp sent the trees down the river but we seem to be going away from it”

“There must be something in the forest water” Kon laughed.

Jin Bu looked confused “Why do you say that?”

“Well it is what I drink of course, and it must have been a rare tonic to make a young girl like yourself call me ‘brother’” He reached up and touched his face and chuckled. “I suppose the shade in the forest has stopped my skin from cracking too early. I must be twenty years older than you at the least.”

“I'm sorry Uncle.” she said, feeling her face tighten. She was young and unmarried and so was unused to talking to older men. The only ones she knew were her father and the market stall holders at the Moon Market, with whom she asked little more of than the price of grain. She had not truly believed Kon to be close to her age, but it had been his friendliness of nature that had made her slip into the familiar Brother rather than Uncle.

“Don't worry, Daughter, It was an extra clove of garlic in the soup of today! Now as for your question, you are quite right that we normally take the logs to river, but we've got a special order from the camp master, he wants to make his own lodgings bigger you see.”

The road opened up into a huge clearing, which seemed to be the size of a small village. “Welcome to Bittersweet” said Kon. The Camp was shaped like an oval papaya, and there were rows of wooden huts built with thin frames of birch and elm wood which ran around the perimeter. Each one had a front porch, and under the awnings some men were sleeping in hammocks tied to the portico pillars while others were huddled in groups around short tables, occasionally cheering or groaning at the position of bones or discs they were rolling and shuffling across tables. Jin Bu stared

at them at them and then looked away when they stared back, gaping at her silently or nudging their companions, but there was no hostility in their faces, just curiosity. With her eyes, she followed the row of huts as it curved around and in the far corner point of the papaya, she saw a hut larger than all the others and guessed this was the Master's house.

Just to the right of the entrance was a pocket of land divided into long wooden stables. They needed no roof as they were built under a huge oak tree, whose hundred year old branches formed a canopy so large it would allow for ten adult elephants to nap in the shade. Chyarmanine tooted a greeting to an male elephant who was munching on a stalk of banana plant. The elephant, who was Chyarmanines partner, Jhabow, ambled over and offered her a bite.

Kon called out "Halt!" and Chyarmanine stopped. Kon stepped down and lifted Jin Bu after him. He detached the chain carrying the log of timber and gave friendly pats and strokes to both elephants.

"Are you happy to see her, Jhabow?" said Kon to the male elephant. "Chyarmanine's been working hard for me today, but I'll let you two have some alone time for now. We'll pick up the log later." He unhooked the chains and the saddle from Chyarmanine's back and stowed them up on a hook by the stables. He hadn't forgotten Jin Bu, or the lost look in her eyes. "Come on, let's go to the rest station and see if your Zaw is there."

A man outside the station smirked as Kon and Jin Bu approached and grinned at Jin Bu with eyes like carving knives. "What's this Kon? You've been hunting something tasty for dinner have you?"

"This is Hkanna Jin Bu of the Blackstone Hkanna" said Kon. "Gum Taw's daughter" he added, making the point even clearer and the man, who had been slouching as he leered at her, stood up straight and set his eyes on the distance.

"She is looking for Zaw, he saved her from a bull on rampage, have you news of this Lam?"

"He's inside..." said Lam and before he could finish Jin Bu dashed past him into the hut.

Zaw was laid out on a bed, his eyes closed. Jin Bu cried his name as she ran to kneel beside him, entwining her hands in his. But he made no motion.

"What happened, is he..?" Jin Bu cried.

"He's not dead" said a girl who had been standing next to the bed. "But he has been badly injured, but he may live yet.". The girl shuffled away to a corner of the room leaving Jin Bu and Zaw together. Jin Bu wondered who this strange girl, with deep red hair and a tattered tunic, was, she seemed to be looking after Zaw, but at the same time looked uncomfortable here. She didn't care. She was here for Zaw.

Zaw and Jin Bu had known each other since they were children, which wasn't unusual in a village of less than a hundred homes. As they were both the youngest in their family, they had found each other worthy playmates when they wanted to escape the seniority of their siblings. On market days, while their mother's haggled with the travelling merchants and farmers, they could be seen but mostly heard running hand in hand through the market, dodging piles of fruit and vegetables while they sang songs with familiar melodies but loud nonsensical words that collapsed in on themselves as they burst into laughter.

They would tie strings around the necks of the semi-wild village cats and walk them down the main road as if they were tame tigers. They ran into rice fields and climbed on the backs of unimpressed oxen, unsuccessfully trying to will them forward. They would hide among the outskirts of the forest, giggling behind the trees like mischievous spirits.

As they became old children, they curved away from each other. Then as they became young adults, they curved back, but this time in secret. In the market where Zaw's family had a stall, Jin Bu would plunge a hand into a sack of grain, as though to feel it for quality, and invite Zaw to do the same. Then they would look out on the market, with their eyes on the distance and talk about the weather while hidden from view, their hands touched and made love. They met at half moonlights under the awnings by windowless walls, and in the forest where none but the birds could see them.

Jin Bu said nothing as she sat by Zaw's bed. She did not know any medicine or healing lore, but she remembered what her mother had said to her once when she had a fever, that love was the best medicine. A garland of tattered jasmine was wrapped around his wrist and Jin Bu lifted his hand up to take in its scent, which was still sweet. She let the flowers fall between their palms and held him by the hand until sundown.

3.

It was the way the door of the rest station swung wildly open and crashed into the wall as if a stormwind had blown in that told Jin Bu who had arrived at the camp. She let go of Zaw's hand and stood up to face her father.

"Hkanna Jin Bu, what are you doing here?" he rumbled, and then looked suspiciously at Zaw as though his unconscious state was just a faint. He walked into the rest station with another man, short and plump, waddling behind him who Jin Bu recognised as Dow Som, the Camp Master and Jin Bu's uncle on her mothers side.

Dow Som rarely left the camp these days but Jin Bu had vague memories of being a toddler at feast days, his twinkling eyes and how she would sit on his knee and listen to his booming thunderous laugh as she pulled his moustache and poked his belly. His body still resembled a thick buttersquash and he still had a moustache, but his eyes no longer shone as they once had, but seemed sunk and worried. There were lines on his face that suggested he had not laughed in a long time. Although he was Camp Master it was her father Gum Taw who held the highest authority here. He still resembled a warrior, his chest and shoulders were the width of a young oak tree and while his face

had lines of age, they only seemed to confirm his status as the battle hardened Head Man of Blackstone. It was only his eyes, agitated and angry, that contradicted his dignity.

Jin Bu let her eyes hide away from his gaze and put all her bravery into her voice. “He saved my life, father.”

“And what were you doing here in the first place? I have told you since you were a child this camp is no place for a women, especially an unmarried one.” he growled.

Jin Bu kept looking at her feet, and thought that it was a small tiding that her father did not appear to know of her and Zaw’s relationship.

Seng Nu appeared in the doorway behind them carrying a basin of hot water.

“What exactly is going on here Dow Som?” thundered Gum Taw to the Camp Master. “I told you no women at the camp, and now not only is my youngest daughter here, but another young woman, who I’m sure from the looks of her is unmarried, is strolling casually through the camp like the worm wiggling on the end of the fishing rod. Is this a rest station or are the scarlet-lit houses of The City expanding their business to the jungle?”

She did not expect anything in return for her help. She had tended the boy’s wounds with lemonleaf and had asked for honey to prevent blackgrowth. She knew that the men of the camp were mostly like her. They lived in the forest for months, some even years at a time, and muttered their feelings as if they were ashamed of them. She had not expected a trade in return and did not want it. But she had not expected to be insulted for being here. She did not like to talk to people. She felt something stirring. Something different than the voices of the forest that she spoke with. This was a small voice inside her getting bigger.

Dow Som had taken out a handfan and was wafting it in front of his face, which had begun to drip with sweat. He looked aside at Seng Nu and then back to Gum Taw “Brother, she is a...”

The basin dropped to the floor with a crash spilling hot water across the floor. Seng Nu had been like a boulder, heavy and grounded. But now she was rolling down a steep hill and that same weight made her unstoppable. Seng Nu turned to face Gum Taw, her eyes aflame. In her sheltered, lonely life she had known sadness, frustration, even disappointment, but anger was new to her and it overwhelmed her.

“She is one who can speak for herself.” she said in a voice barbed with thorns. “and I don’t know what a scarlet-lit house is, but your voice dipped when you said it so I can only guess it is a place where respect is lacking. But I do know what a worm is and I know they are blind, so the closest thing to a worm in this room is the man who is ignorant to everything.”

For a brief moment, the only thing that could be heard was Dow Som's handfan, which was now making a sound like a bird taking off as he shook it violently in front of his sweat-laden face. Jin Bu felt her the skin on her face tighten as she feared the worst for Seng Nu. She had not expected the young girl, who up until this point had been as quiet and a woodmouse, to be the first person she could remember to speak to her father like that!

Gum Taw's eyes were aflame with anger too. He moved closer to Seng Nu her like a panther stalking a pigeon. But the pigeon did not fly or cower, but stood defiantly, meeting his eyes with her own.

"Who is your father, girl? you shame him and your clan with the way you speak to me," he said through gritted teeth. He spoke in a slow growl and each word simmered with aggression and the muscles on his neck bulged like tightly wound rope around a restrained and struggling beast.

"Or maybe your father is the one to blame here", he growled to her face.

Seng Nu let it roll over her like she would a breeze. She did not know her father and had no clan to be loyal to. She felt the angry energy sapping from her and no longer cared to trade insults with this oaf of a man. She bent down and picked up the now empty basin and made to return back outside to refill it.

"She has no family" said Dow Som. "She is a forest orphan."

"If she was raised by the forest she would speak in the language of creeper trees and jungle pigs, but she has made herself understood well enough here." Said Gum Taw, now speaking to Dow Som, as if Seng Nu wasn't there.

"Grandma Lum Naw brought her up"

"Not very well it seems"

At this Seng Nu turned back around.

"The old lady left us five, maybe six years ago." Said Dow Som

"Six years" said Seng Nu. "And don't talk about Lum Naw again, her name in your mouth is an unnatural thing".

She spoke quickly but quietly. It was all she could think of to defend Lum Naw's honour. The angry person who had shouted at the big man in a rage felt like a different person, an age ago.

Gum Taw turned towards her, blowing air out his nostrils like a raging bullock. “Get out of my camp!” he yelled, raising his voice loud enough for the jungle doves on the roof of the rest station to take flight, their wings flapping almost as furiously as the fan in Dow Som’s hand had been.

Jin Bu, who had been standing halfway between the bed and her father, then spoke.

“But father she is healing Zaw.”

“And why does that concern you?” thundered back Gum Taw. It was a not a question she was meant to answer, and she detected a faint hint of suspicion in his voice.

Jin Bu saw the hint and tried to speak calmly as if Zaw was just another man of the camp. “I told you father he saved my life. There was an elephant. He distracted it from me but it got him as he ran.”

Gum Taw looked at Dow Som who nodded to confirm.

“Where is the camp healer?” barked Gum Taw.

“Alian left a month ago, Brother. He has gone back to his village to look after his mother she is sick”

“Then get a new healer. A man.” He looked at Seng Nu. “You. Out of here.”

Seng simply said what she knew to be true. “This man will die if I do not take rebandage his wounds tonight”.

Jin Bu’s felt as though her legs had been hollowed out and she almost stumbled over. She looked up to her Father with pleading eyes. “Father! please let her stay. Zaw...”

Gum Taw reached out and caught the desperation in her voice.

“Tell me who this man is to you, daughter. You have called him by his name twice now.”

Maybe it was because she had just witnessed Seng Nu talk to her father in a way that no man, let alone a woman, had talked to him before, that Jin Bu herself felt inspired to dare, putting aside any pretence that the man in the bed meant nothing to her.

“His name is Zaw and I love him. We will be married.” Her breath had become quick and shallow but her eyes now held her father’s gaze. The secret had unravelled and now hung in the air waiting for the winds to blow it one way or another.

“What is this boy’s clan?” said Gum Taw, but he already knew the answer, recognising Zaw as the boy his youngest daughter used to run around with when she was just a child.

In The Valley, marriage was a tightly woven basket of relationships between each of the twenty clans with each pairing only allowing their sons or daughter to marry in one direction. Jin Bu was from the Hkanna Clan and Zaw was a Tairu. Tairu daughters could Hkanna sons, but the reverse went against the customary law, and made Jin Bu and Zaw’s relationship unwoven.

The custom served to bound the clans together and given a central core to Valley society that linked all the villages from the foot of the mountains to the outskirts of The City. In reality, exceptions were often made. There might be too many or too little girls or boys in one family and not enough matching pairs to marry them too, and parents would rather see their children married irregularly than alone. Other times, *unwoven* lovers might simply elope together. While this was frowned upon, in most cases the couple would return after a few months, by which time any anger from the families had long since been overruled by the anxiety to see their sons and daughters again. Zaw and Jin Bu might have planned on this but her father’s status made it more than difficult. While being headman came with privilege, there was also the responsibility of setting an example for the rest of the village. The same eyes that looked up to Gum Taw and his Blackstone Hkanna Clan were the same ones that scrutinised him and watched for any weakness that could be used months, even years into the future. An unwoven marriage might not have led to him stepping down, but it would have been a weight on the scale of against him when he made decisions as a leader. Jin Bu knew that if she ran away with Zaw her father may never speak to her again and the Hkanna Blackstone family might shut her out for good.

Jin Bu’s eyes had already welled with tears but she kept them looking forward in what was a final futile attempt at defiance. “It doesn’t matter what his clan is!”

But she knew that to her father it meant everything.

“The girl can stay here to look after him tonight. But tomorrow she must leave. You are coming back with me right now.” Said Gum Taw.

And that was that.

Zaw woke up a few days later with the exhaustion that can only come from sleeping so long. Slowly he remembered what had happened. Jin Bu. She had climbed a tree to escape Pinkwetha. Was she safe? He sat up in bed and his hand brushed against some flowers of jasmine that had been left by his pillow all tattered yellow and ready to rot, except one that had been stained ruby red in blood. Zaw held it up to the light. Jin Bu had gripped the branches so tightly they had cut her palms.

“You’re awake at last young man!” Kon was at the door, beaming at him like a ray of morning sun made human. “You must be hungry, I’ll get you some rice soup. If that’s ok with the healer” he said, putting a light emphasis on the last word as he looked towards the far corner of the room. Zaw noticed there was someone else in the room, but it wasn’t Jin Bu. She was knelt down by the corner grate scrubbing white cloth bandages.

The girl looked up and made an awkward smile at Kon. “Add an extra clove of garlic and some strips of sweetbark, they’ll help him get his energy back quicker.”

“Sounds delicious, I might make one for myself too!” said Kon. “Have you met Seng Nu, Zaw? She acts all quiet but don’t get on her bad side or she’ll chew you up like she did to the Big Man a few nights ago”. And then he left, to get Zaw’s breakfast, laughing to himself.

Seng Nu came to Zaw’s side and placed his hand on his forehead. She was only supposed to stay for one night but had stayed here caring for him.

“Big Man?” asked Zaw, pushing himself up to a sitting position.

“The fever has gone, that’s good.”

“I remember you now” Said Zaw, “you were there in the forest. I thought you were a dream”. He was staring at Seng Nu now, and she looked away. She had been the centre of attention in the camp recently and was used to seeing the men peering at her through the windows of the rest station, but there was in something in Zaw’s eyes that captured her too easily, perhaps because she had been waiting so long to see them. For the last few days she had tended him and had become familiar with his body. She had massaged his hands and fingers as he lay recovering and could see he had not worked at the camp long, they were still mostly smooth and unworn, except for the fresh calluses on the tips of his fingers and cup of his thumb, like rough bug tunnels on spring oak leaves. His leg were lean but sinewy, he was a fast runner. She loved his hair. It was dark and started to curl as it reached his shoulders. She had combed it as he slept, even though this was a task quite clearly beyond what was expected of a healer.

“But it’s funny my dreams and memories have mixed together. I dreamed you knocked a tree clean over onto Pinkwetha with just a kick of your legs”

“Oh you dreamed that did you?” Seng Nu said, allowing herself to smile.

“Yes you were lucky you weren’t hurt by the falling tree too” Said Zaw.

Seng Nu laughed and Zaw couldn’t understand why.

“Did I remember wrong?”

“A little.”

8.

Chyarmanine walked through the forest on her way to find an late afternoon meal, her legs buzzing with the worn out energy that could only come from a full day dragging logs from the depths of the forest to the river bank. She thought about the humans, why were they so complicated?

She had been watching their comings and goings with interest, ever since she had carried the first young lady into the camp. Pretending to be lost, she would casually wander through the camp, from hut to hut and linger by the windows and doorways hoping to pick up a morsel of fresh information. She couldn’t understand exactly what they said, but elephants had a great skill for reading body language.

She had known the apprentice oozie Zaw for a year and liked him. There were always a few among any group of novices who, sitting on an elephant for the first time, found that their pretensions had become as elevated as their backsides. They would brandish the whip, treating the elephant as a mere tool in their hands. Zaw was the opposite. From the moment he arrived at the camp, he had made a point to learn all of the elephant names and had never acted as though he was above them, no matter how high he was sitting. Of course he did not speak their language, but as he walked alongside the elephants on their way into the forest to collect teakwood, he would talk to each one in tones that were upbeat on the way there and soothing on the way back. When he was assigned to cleaning, he always made sure to bring fresh chomaleaves from the forest, because he knew that the elephants loved the bubbling sensation on their skin when they were lathered onto their backs.

She never would have guessed that the polite young man would be at the centre of a love story with so many threads. Zaw and Jin Bu were lovers, that was clear enough, but the big man, who stomped around and gave orders to the fat man, had taken her away. If Zaw and Jin Bu loved each other then why would her father get in the way of that happiness? It made little sense to an elephant.

Chyarmanine found the patch of bamboo she was looking for and unrolled her trunk to pull off a fresh stick. She would need to eat until sundown now, pulling, breaking and chewing as much bamboo, grass, vines and creepers as she could find in order to regain her energy for tomorrow. As she chewed and crunched she remembered her own courtship with Jhabow. It must have been twenty years ago that she met him. Before they could even kiss he had been taken by the men to another camp faraway. How she had waited lonely under seven moons for him to return. And how he had returned! The memory of that night was still so clear to her, sharper than even the fresh bamboo that she was chewing. She had considered that it might be the same for Zaw and Jin Bu, that she would return soon, but Zaw's dark cloud that he had been wearing suggested this was not the case. He was inconsolable. Jin Bu had gone away for good.

Then there was another girl, the one who lived in the forest, but came to the camp in the day, even though this seemed to infuriate Dow Som, the camp Master, who would order her to leave as soon as she arrived. His orders had been ignored as she now had a bodyguard. Ever since the day he raged through the forest and then been caught under the tree, Pinkwetha had been loyal to Seng Nu and Seng Nu alone. To the astonishment of men and elephant alike, she was often seen riding him through the camp and along the forest trails. The young bull elephant's demeanour was certainly calmer than before, but he would snort and bellow angrily if anyone so much as a hand on Seng Nu, which meant that no matter how much Dow Som yelled and shouted, she would not leave and he could not make her.

Chyarmanine knew why she wanted to be at the camp, and wondered if it was as obvious to Zaw. After breakfast time was over and the oozies and the elephants were out working in the forest, Seng Nu would stay around the cook station, watching Zaw clean the pots and pans and trying to build up the courage to start a conversation with him. Some humans were loud and some were quiet but Seng Nu seemed to be a mix of both. When she arrived at the camp in the mornings, sometimes with a basket of forest blue yams or northspice root, she had the caution and bashfulness of a sparrow pecking at spilt grains of rice next to a busy kitchen, who would flutter away if someone so much as looked at them. Later she would grow in confidence and was almost a different person as she chatted to Zaw while he cleaned and began preparing the food for later. She was like a forest flower that bloomed brightly just once a year, the rest of the time cloaked as it gathering energy. Zaw was not a rude man and he always thanked Seng Nu but even though he would answer her questions he did so without any of the enthusiasm that she tried to bring. What Seng Nu saw in him was hard to tell, because there was no charm to Zaw anymore, nor smile on his face. Chyarmanine wondered if Zaw would ever get over Jin Bu. Would she have been able to get over Jhabow if he had never come back?

She reached out her trunk to grab another stick of bamboo. She did not know why but they always tasted better at night. She heard footsteps behind her but was not afraid and did not look around. She knew from the sound each foot made and the rhythm of the walk exactly who it was. Jhabow nuzzled his rough head into her side and they curled their trunks around each other in a secret midnight kiss.

9.

Zaw lay in bed listening to the monsoon rains drumming on the roof above him, thinking that it might be the only sound on earth that was both deafening and calming. Though it was louder than an elephant's trumpet, he always found that the deep hum of the rain hitting the roof would lull him to sleep. Yet before he could, the downpour ended and the only sound left behind was the irregular drip and splish of water dripping from the trees and awnings. Zaw's mind wandered inside itself, to the place where he remembered Jin Bu, a once happy place now tainted with bitterness.

She had left. Not just him, but the valley too. He had heard news from Blackstone that she was no longer in her father's house. Whether she had left or been sent was unclear, but he was told that she was never coming back.

A memory is a image of the past, and a dream is an image of the future and Zaw had a memory of a dream. Their dream. He would work at the camp for a few years to save the money for her bridewealth. The clan basket wouldn't matter, he would change his name if he had to or they would run away together if needed. They would build a house together by the edge of the forest and grow lemons and bananas and keep chickens too for breakfast eggs. He would bring Jin Bu wild jasmine flowers from the forest each morning and she would lace them into her hair. They would take walks by the river meeting the elephants on the way and he would impress her by riding them without a saddle.

These past futures became were now like the bitterest of enemies as they taunted him with their own impossibility.

Seng Nu said she could make him forget. Forget the house with the lemons and the bananas, forget the chickens. Forget all the things that made his heart ache uncontrollably. She said she could make him forget Jin Bu.

She had powers and had helped him remember what had happened that day in the forest. The tree had not fallen, she had kicked it over. Just her. She had said she could change minds as well as move things. It was possible, though she had not tried it before.

Zaw rose from his bed and stepped out of the cabin and and breathed the cool air of the late night. The sky in the east was like a dark blue iris, with dull grey and blue clouds piercing the sky to herald the early morning. He had not slept this whole night.

A candle was burning in the cook station across the camp. He walked across the open clearing, taking his time to step around the puddles. Seng Nu was sitting there, peeling riverroots and humming to herself.

Zaw looked at her with a forlorn expression.

Seng Nu looked up at him and found the reflection of the light in his eyes. “We must go to my house”. The candle went out as she stood up, though she did not touch it and there was no wind. She walked on, leading him into the forest as the rains started again, washing away the sweat of the night.

4.

Seng Nu lived not too far from the camp, on a small hill in an island where the where sinews of the main river had webbed out to encircle a parcel of land. The water was not deep and you could step over the channels, but even in the hot season, when the waters dried up, the land was still fairly muddy and it was for this reason that no one from the camp had ever come close to the cottage in the middle of these streams. Now, in the middle of the rains, the land around the cottage was a bog, but Seng Nu had already laid stepping stones and she bounced from the one to the next with an unthinking confidence. Zaw took each one with a bit more caution and wished she had placed them closer to each other.

The path of stones ended and the land became firmer and there on a slightly raised mound in the jungle was Seng Nu’s house. It was built in the style of The Valley with a raised, pointed roof that crested from the front to the back like a chicken comb, and curved down on each side over the edges of the building. In the rainy season it would send dripping water out and away and in the hot season it would give shade indoors. And yet despite it’s recognisable design, there was a wildness to it that seemed to give the impression that this had not been built by human hands but was the forest’s own attempt at emulating the village. The wood on the outside walls still had bark attached and the dirt that clung to the skirts gave the impression that the house had not been built on top of the ground but had been birthed below it and was still growing out of the earth. was not sitting on top of the earth, but was growing from it.

Inside, there was only one room and it was full of plants from the jungle. Lum Naw had said that the scents and the pollen would help disguise the hut and protect them from the predators of the forest, though Seng Nu suspected it was simply because Lum Naw wanted to be close to the forest at all times, even when she slept. To walk inside go in was not to escape the forest, but simply to move to a more ordered and slightly less chaotic part of it. Flowers of northspice and sourslip faced the southern windows while pomeflower and marrowlai creepers sneaked up and out of their pots to make strange maps of green vine against the white painted walls. Outside she kept a bush of wild jasmine which she plucked each morning to make tea and a row of flowers planted from seeds Seng Nu had collected in the even deeper forest, so rare they had no names, although Lum Naw had said they did but they were in a different language. They bloomed at unexpected times like strange feelings, their scent wandering into the house in the dead of night, to wake Seng Nu up like a memory of something that happened a thousand years ago.

“Do you live here alone?” asked Zaw as they stepped in out of the rain.

“Yes, me and the plants.” Said Seng Nu. “Sit down for a little bit, I need to prepare something.”

Zaw took a seat on a stool that had been made from an old dead tree. The top had been sanded flat, but the gnarled, twisting bark of the trunk still showed in the relief of the base. "I thought there was another lady here?"

"Yes, Lum Naw, she raised me, but she died."

"Your mother?"

"No".

Zaw wondered how it was possible for someone so young to have lived here alone for so long. He watched her as she strimmed tiny pink berries from a potted plant into a small stone bowl. "What is that? I've never seen that fruit before."

"Something to help you forget" said Seng Nu. As she looked under the wiry branches for berries just the right shade of pink, she thought about Lum Naw. She would take the berries when she had pains. Not for pains of the body, like headaches or fevers, for there were many other remedies the forest offered for those afflictions. These pink berries were for "inside pain". Every now and then.

She would take one off the little plant and then cut it in half and half again. If she took that quarter before she slept, she would wake up the next day forgetting what ever had troubled her.

But her inside pain, whatever it was, for she never told Seng Nu, were like the dead leaves that blew into the house as the weather cooled. You could sweep them up, but you could not stop them coming back the next year. Making herself forget was her way of keeping her mind clean, if only for a short while. "One half is a whole day".

Seng Nu had almost stripped the plant clean and was mashing the berries up into the mixing bowl. She walked over to Zaw and held out her hand. "Give me the flowers."

Zaw passed her a tiny bouquet of jasmine flowers. They were already yellowed were half stained with the red from where Jin Bu had torn her hand climbing the tree. He had given them to her and they had ended the day crumpled by his bedside as Jin Bu was led back to the village. When he had woken up he had kept them as a keepsake, flattened in a book to stop them disintegrating.

Seng Nu wasn't sure if the flowers were needed to make this work. After all Lum Naw, had never made any additions. Still, they might help Zaw focus his mind on what he wanted to forget if he knew they were in there.

Seng Nu added the flowers to the bowl and mashed them into a paste. She took a strand of her own hair and cut it into tiny pieces that she added to the bowl too. She had to make sure that it wasn't

just the memory of Jin Bu she would dissolve, but the memory of her doing so. If Zaw knew she had helped him to forget something, then that would always be a loose thread that could unravel the entire cloth if it was pulled.

Outside, the rain had started up again and was punching itself through the treetops. Faster and heavier, until the sounds of each drop merged into one loud roar that draped the night in a blanket.

5.

It had been two full moons since the night Seng Nu made Zaw forget Jin Bu. He was back to his old self, and his smile had reappeared as if from hibernation.

If someone asked him about Jin Bu, he would recall her as a childhood friend who had been close to him for a while, but he no longer knew of their relationship, and the memory of her would flutter out of his mind as quickly as it arrived.

The rains had finally stopped and the forest sparkled green and the soft earth gave way to new shoots that sprung up bristling through the dead leaves.

“You can fry these, but you need to soak them in water overnight” said Seng Nu pointing out a bunch of chubby catkins dangling from the low branches of a goldwillow tree.

“What would I ever do without you Seng Nu?” Beamed Zaw and then folded his lips together to suppress a grin, as he picked off the catkins.

Seng Nu caught the expression “Hey don’t make fun of me!” she reached up a hand and made to punch him but pulled her hand back before she touched him. She was still unused to being friends with people, and was unsure what was appropriate when it came to physical contact. Of course she had been intimate with Zaw before, she had bandaged his leg, tended him by his bedside for nights. But now, as they walked together through the forest, a touch between them would mean something more and she wasn’t yet sure it would mean the same thing for both of them.

“I’m only joking!” said Zaw, giving Seng Nu a friendly pat on her shoulder. “I really do enjoy your company on these trips. Of course I already know about the goldwillow catkins, my mother used to make them for us when I was a child. But there’s so much you’ve shown me here in the forest that I don’t know about. Like the barrel gourds we roasted on the fire last week or the three pointed edible flowers we picked already today.”

He reached into his basket and picked one of the flowers out. At the centre of the flower was a circle of small golden anthers which sat on one large petal, triangular in shape, purple in colour. Zaw held it up to the sunlight. “It’s funny isn’t it, this flower? We don’t normally see three of something. Two legs, four legs, six legs, eight legs, two petals, four petals, five petals even. But

never three. Except this peculiar flower.” He put it in his mouth and let the flavour roll around his tongue. “Have you ever seen another flower with three petals Seng Nu?”

But Seng Nu was barely even listening. She was still thinking about the touch of his hand on her shoulder.

Later they walked even deeper into the forest, to an area so thick with life that even in the day the dense roof of trees blocking out the sun made it seem like evening. There were no paths either, just places where the trees parted.

Zaw stopped to collect a bunch of white starflowers that were growing from the moss under an Oakenbore tree.

Seng Nu frowned as she waited. “What are you getting them for? They taste of nothing.”

“They make a plate look nice though” said Zaw, wincing as he stood back up.

His damaged leg had never fully healed and it was unlikely he would ever become an oozie now. But the men at the camp enjoyed having him around, and after the camp cook went back to his village to marry, the men asked Zaw to take over the camp kitchens. Though he was sad that he would no longer ride elephants, Zaw had made his new job of cooking breakfast and dinner for a troop of men and elephants a new path to explore.

“I added these to the feast dishes for the Gate of Winter” he said, offering Seng Nu one of the tiny white flowers.

“What’s the Gate of Winter?” said Seng Nu taking the flower.

Zaw looked at her, his mouth ever so slightly ajar. “You don’t know Gate of Winter? How could you not know the biggest celebration of the year. No wonder you weren’t around a few days ago, you didn’t know.”

Seng Nu shrugged and said nothing. In fact she did know what the Gate of Winter was. Naw and her had celebrated it each year when the rains stopped. Naw had even given Seng Nu her own set of bells to call for the gate to be opened. It had always been a small celebration for her so when she had seen the camp preparing for their own larger Gate of Winter feast, she did not want to be a part of it. It did not feel like it was a Gate for her. So she had scampered back to her own home while the men rang their bells and ate.

“I’m sorry Seng Nu, of course you wouldn’t know about the Gate, you were brought up in the forest weren’t you? Next year, you’ll have to come, I’ll get you a bell and cook you something delicious”

“I’d like that” said Seng Nu.

As cook, Zaw was not only concerned with giving the men of the camp sustenance, but wanted to know whether they liked it too. He had started by adding a few more cloves of garlic which made the aroma more robust. Then he had a competition with himself to chop the chillies as fine as he could, so their zest would find every spoon that dipped into every bowl. The old cook had always just chucked whatever vegetable was around into the pot and cooked them all together, but Zaw began to experiment with the amount of each ingredient and to give lists of specific ingredients to the food porters who went into the valley to bring back supplies. Instead of one big pot, he would make two smaller dishes, and did not care that it meant more work, after all what other use did he have for his time? He found that carrots and ginger worked well together and so did sweet apples and rockroot. Squash vines went well with orange toms but not green ones. Of course all experiments were a risk and even Zaw felt he had gone too far when he served a green banana and chilli curry that most of the men had refused to eat and those that did politely declared the taste “interesting”. He enjoyed the time he spent with Seng Nu, as she was the only person, apart from the elephants, who appreciated the jungle’s bounty.

“Look at this” he said leaving the path again and poked a stick at the leaves of a small ground plant. It had no fruit or flowers, but on each stem there were rows of thin leaves and as he touched them with the stick, the leaves curled and folded so they reduced in width, hiding the plant from any predator who fancied a bite of a thick juicy leaf.

“Fingercurl” Said Seng Nu. “I used to spend hours playing with them, waiting for the leaves to reopen.”

“How long does it take?” asked Zaw. “I’ve never stuck around to watch.”

“Too long.” Seng Nu walked on and had stopped by a hedge of bright red berries and was strimming them into her basket.

Zaw caught up with her and took one of the berries in his hand and looked at it carefully. “What are you doing?”

Seng Nu smiled back at him “don’t pretend you don’t know! This will go very well with apples and mushrooms,”

“This is not banberry. Look, see around the stem, there are thin green marks, like tiny blades of grass. Banberry does not have that. This is Olmaberry. If you put that in your mouth...” He stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes.

Seng Nu dropped the basket and the berries, poisonous and edible, spilled to the forest floor.

“Oh Oh! I’m sorry...I didn’t know!” she sat down and buried her head in her knees. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry”

Zaw placed a friendly hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright. We haven’t eaten them have we?”

“But I didn’t know...I could have killed you all.” Seng Nu sniffed.

“No you couldn’t. My legs might be useless these days, but my eyesight is fine enough. I’m just surprised you didn’t know yourself. I thought you knew all the plants in the forest.”

Seng Nu said nothing. She picked up the Olmaberry and studied it.

“I don’t know everything”.

Seng Nu looked down at the scattered berries. With her mind, she sent the good berries floating up at the speed of smoke and then let them drop into the basket. The poisonous ones remained on the forest floor.

“I have a question” Said Zaw.

Seng Nu kept her eyes on the basket and the berries. “Yes?”

“If you can move things with your mind, then why, on the day you met me, did you kick the tree over? Why didn’t you just use your mind to do it?”

“Of course I used my mind!, you think I can kick a tree down with my legs only?”

“So the kick..?”

Seng Nu made a slightly sheepish expression but then laughed. “The kick was just for show!”

“You’re a pretty funny girl you know.” Said Zaw. “Why don’t you ever join us at the camp to eat. You help me find all this delicious food, but you never stay to eat it with us.”

Seng Nu muttered something that sounded like “don’t want to”. Really she just wanted to be with Zaw and didn’t care to be around others.

“and I would hate for you to die because you ate the wrong berry.” said Zaw.

Seng Nu gave him a look of protest.

“Not that you don’t have a great knowledge of jungle food” Zaw said quickly. “None of us knows everything though. But a group knows more than one person. Did you ever wonder how we know which berries are poisonous? It’s because someone died after eating them. It could have been hundred years ago on the far side of The Valley, or even beyond, but it’s some of the most precious knowledge we have. And the only reason we have it is because we eat together. If you eat by yourself, then you’re taking a risk and turning your back on the sacrifices those people made all those years ago.”

He put his arm around her and gave her a friendly shake. “Which is why you shouldn’t eat alone anymore, come join the camp for dinner tonight. I know you’re shy, so I’ll sit next to you, ok?”

Seng Nu nodded in a daze and made an affirmative sound. It hadn’t been the speech about ancestors that had convinced her.

She would not be a fingercurl anymore.

They walked back to the camp and as they did the path seemed to be narrower than it was when they came in. It was as though the forest itself was trying to make them walk closer together.

6.

Six years earlier

Naw had come with Seng Nu to collect breakfast. She said she wanted to eat an apple straight from the tree. There only was one apple tree so that confirmed their route. Before they left, Naw asked Seng Nu to plait her hair. Like Seng Nu, she kept it at waist length, but age had thinned and washed it out. She had no reason to be vain but would comb it once a month just to remove the tangles, and then would let it get progressively more and more wild each day, until it had curled up into wild strands that made her head resemble the pots of wild creepers that grew in the house. Seng Nu brushed Naw’s hair through with oil and then plaited her hair into a thin white tail. Seng Nu thought it looked a little like a rat’s thin tail, but decided not to say it out loud. Naw had never worn her hair like this. She had never worn her hair like anything. Naw stooped down, groaning softly as her knees bent and reached her hand out into the wild grass to pluck a forest daisy. She pushed the

stem through the folds of the hair braid and looked at herself in a bowl of water. She looked nice. Then she plaited Seng Nu's hair commenting on the rarity of its dark orange colour. Seng Nu chose a dandelion for herself. She also looked at herself. She looked nice too.

"Let's go and get some apples" said Naw, As she walked down the path to the trees, Seng Nu ran ahead. There was only one apple tree in the forest that they knew of. Naw said it was young compared to the rest of the trees, but it didn't look that way to Seng Nu. The trunk was as thick as an elephant's leg, and more rough. She found easy footholds in the bark as she climbed up into the higher branches. By now she already knew which apples were ready to pick, but she waited for Naw to arrive. She owed her that.

"See anything good?" said Naw as she hobbled out of the forest towards the apple tree. She stopped underneath it.

"yes mother, there's a nice juicy one right here, shall I get it for you?" Said Seng Nu

"I told you not to call me that" Naw snapped. "hold on. Don't touch it yet. Describe it to me."

Naw was standing under the tree, and didn't look up. Seng Nu doubted if she could. She had only ever known Naw as a old woman and couldn't imagine a time when her shoulders weren't almost up to her ears. But even though she wasn't tall or lean, she had unmistakeable kinship with the trees that she had grown old with. Seng Nu had seen birds land on her shoulders when she stood in the forest for more than a moment and sometimes wondered if moss would begin to grow up her legs or berries would grow from her fingernails if she stood for any longer.

"It's green!" said Seng Nu, with a hint of impatience.

"I'm sure it is" said Naw,

Seng Nu ran ahead and by the time Naw had arrived at the tree, she had already climbed up and was sitting on a branch, her legs swinging high above the ground.

who kept staring ahead not looking at anything in particular. Even if she looked up, her eyesight had become so bad she wouldn't have seen beyond the first rung of branches. "Tell me about it is it big? How big, what kind of green is it? What does it look like? Tell me as much as you can"

"It's so big, we could cut it in two and eat it for breakfast together!" said Seng Nu. "If I held it my hand and stretched my arms fully out, it would block the sun. And the full moon too if I held it at night. It's green...bright green, the colour of elm leaves after rain. And there's some purple too" She tried to think of something that was purple. "Like a bruise"

“What kind of bruise?” asked Naw.

“The kind you get when someone grabs your arm tight and digs their fingers in.” Said Seng Nu.

“Tell me about the stem” Naw asked after a while.

“It’s like a fishing rod. The apple is the fish the branch is the rod and the stem is the wire” said Seng Nu.

“That’s a good description” Said Naw. “just one more question. What does the apple say to you?”

“What does the apple say to me?” said Seng Nu, puzzled.

“Yes what does it say? Imagine it could speak to you and then feel it speak to you”

“it says ‘eat me, before I go rotten on the branch’” she called down.

“Does it now?” said Naw, who was still standing under the tree not looking up. “I’m not sure it does. Apples don’t speak our language. I’m not even sure they use words.”

“So, what does it say?” Said Seng Nu.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? they don’t speak our language. I can’t tell you what they say, no more than they can tell each other what you are saying about them”

Seng Nu looked suspiciously at the large green and purple apple and the smaller redder one beside it and wondered if they were gossiping about her.

“Make sure you are holding the branch tightly” Said Naw.

“Why?” Said Seng Nu, who was used to following Naw’s directions and did it anyway. She looked down and saw that Naw, who still had not looked up, was holding a hand out, her palm open.

Pip!

What was that sound? Seng Nu looked back along the branch to where it had come from and saw the apple turning in the air. At first she thought it was the wind but then remembered there was no

wind that day and the leaves surrounding the apple were still. She reached out for it, but then pulled back and gripped the tree even tighter when she realised that the apple wasn't attached to the tree any more, but was floating, spinning in mid air.

Then it dropped, or rather glided, downwards, slowly but truly into Naw's outstretched hand. Naw curled her fingers around the apple and then brought it to her mouth to take a small bite. She chewed the sweet flesh and then slowly tilted her head up, the rusted joints of her neck straining as she lifted her eyes up to meet Seng Nu. Seng Nu's mouth was wide open with the expression of shock and joy a child makes when they realise they will be living in a world with wonderful things. Naw swallowed the bite of apple and then looked at Seng Nu, with a smirk. Then she did something Seng Nu had never seen before: she leaned back her head even more and laughed. As the waves of delight shook the clearing. Seng Nu, in her wonder, began to laugh too and soon the forest, if not the whole valley, was alive to the sound of two bells, newly cast and ringing for the first time.

7.

Green and orange tentacles poked out from the basket Seng Nu was carrying into the kitchen station. "Lunch" she said, placing it down on the counter in front of Zaw who was still clearing away the remnants of breakfast.

Zaw turned around, his face beaming "Seng Nu! What have you got for me?" it was a genuine question, for he wasn't entirely sure if it was a vegetable or some kind of river creature.

Seng Nu took out one of the limbs, and the roots dangling from the bottom confirmed it was a plant. She spoke in the clear and slow tones of a teacher. "Last week we made sour soup with the leaf from the..."

"...Tigerbite plant!" said Zaw, finishing her sentence "We made sour soup with it, but last night I made a tigerbite and red pea curry..."

"...And how did it taste?"

"Terrible, but the elephants enjoyed it at least."

Seng Nu laughed, enjoying how comfortable things were starting to feel with Zaw. She was no longer the woodmouse who scurried into the camp when no one was looking and ran away when someone so much as turned their head. Zaw was the first friend of her own age she had ever had and laughing with him was something beautiful.

“This week we are not going to do sour, we are going to do...well go ahead have a taste” she took one of the green limb-like plants out of her basket and offered it him.

Zaw who looked at it suspiciously, “And you’ve eaten this before?”

Seng Nu sighed “yes! I’m not trying to poison you, Everything I give you I have already eaten. If you find me dead in the forest then you’ll know that I gave my life for you.”

Zaw took a bite and almost immediately his tongue curled. “It’s bitter!” he said spitting pieces of green flesh onto the counter.

“We need cook it first” laughed Seng Nu.

“you offered it to me!”

“yes, to cook, not eat raw!” Seng Nu picked the tentacle up. “This plant, which I call greenray, is very bitter, but if you add just a little bit of it to a soup, it will give it an extra petal of flavour.”

“An extra petal of flavour? Sounds like something old man Kon would say.” said Zaw, still spitting bits of the bitter fruit from his mouth. “Next time tell me how I’m supposed to eat this before I take huge bite! Why do you call it greenray?”

“Because no one has named it yet”

“I mean why the name...it doesn’t look like a ray of sunshine at all. It’s all furry and twisted, it looks more like a spiders arm.”

“You must have seen some giant spiders.”

“I suppose you’re right, no one would eat it if we called it spider arm, would they? Names are important for food.”

Seng Nu grinned. “Sure, but you could have called your banana and chilli curry rainbows and babysmiles and it wouldn’t have tasted any better.”

“You’re never going to let me forget that are you?”

“My stomach still hurts in sympathy for those poor men you fed that too!”

Zaw had always treated tradition like sailing down a river, or at least what he imagined that would be like. He was happy to let the current take him, but would stick a paddle in the water if it tried to take him somewhere he didn't want to go. Sometimes he even sought out those unwelcome currents just so he could row against them, like when he had painted his nails with charcoal as a young teen or was the only man on camp that tied his longyi with a sideknot.

And maybe that was why a seed had been planted in his mind that would grow into the idea that something more than friendship with the girl with no clan who could kick down trees and make leaves float into her hand.

Seng Nu had begun chopping the greenhoof into "What are they talking about?" said Seng Nu, motioned towards the tables where a group of men were hunched around a table. They seemed agitated and were in deep conversation.

"They are grumbling because the master is not giving them the annual rice gift."

"They get it every year?"

"Only when the sale of timber has been good. This year was not a good year, according to the Master. Normally they would accept that, except that he's managed to find money for that." Zaw pointed out across the camp towards the Master's house. All the other men of the camp shared communal huts, but the Master, Dow Som, lived in a large two storey house, which had just been given an extension and a coat of paint. It gleamed so bright at midday that ducks would sometimes land on the roof as they had mistaken it for a pond.

Seng Nu went over to the men to collect their finished breakfast bowls.

"I'm sorry about what happened" she said.

"Thank you daughter" said Dai Pa, one of the camp elders whose hair was grey, though he called it silver, and so thin he no longer cared to tie it up, but let it hang loose to his shoulders. He had worked at Bittersweet for almost twenty years riding Jaseik, the most senior elephant, who was perhaps the closest thing he had to family. "What have you got Zaw cooking for us today?"

Seng Nu smiled. Dai Pa and Kon were among the few that had been friendly to her. Here in the camp. To the young and those who weren't paying attention Seng Nu was a girl who was neither kin nor a marriage prospect so they had little reason to talk to her. Some of the older men had seen men die before and so when they had seen the red stained sheets from Zaw's bed being taken out to be cleaned, they struggled to believe that someone could have lost so much blood and recover. They also knew that not even the most experienced of the oozies could have tamed an elephant like Pinkwetha as she had done. They also remembered Lum Naw, the old woman who had lived in the forest years ago and was rumoured to snap trees in half like twigs. And so they kept a respectable distance from Seng Nu, not wanting to get on her wrong side, but at the same time feeling that if

they were ever gored by an elephant or a felled under falling timber that they would be glad if Seng Nu was there to heal them.

And everyone was grateful for her tutelage of Zaw in the kitchen.

“We’ve got some greenray” said Seng Nu. “but I’m making sure he’s cooking it first, so it’s not too bitter.” Dai Pa

“Greenray? Who calls it that?” Said Kon.

“I do!” said Seng Nu.

“My grandmother used collect it from the forest because no one ever sold it in the markets. She called it sungreen herself. I’m looking forward to tasting it for the first time since I was a young boy.”

“At least there’s some good news for our plates today, if not our pockets.” said Dai Pa, although his expression did not seem so optimistic.

“It’s not the money though is it?” Said Kon. “It’s the disrespect. We worked so hard this past season to get the timber in. I’ve been here for fifteen seasons and I know we had a good year. I know the prices in The City can change. But even just one extra jade leaf would have been appreciated”

“Then why don’t we ask for it?” Said Sutring, one of the youngest oozies at camp, slamming his fist down on the table. There were nods around the table at his words, which had been said with such force that it was understood that he was talking about asking the sort of question that wouldn’t take no for an answer.

His comment seemed to stoke the muttering around the table which began to breathe like embers about to ignite.

And then, like voles in the field as the shadow of a hawk passes over, the men stopped talking.

Seng Nu turned around to see Dow Som entering the dining area. He did not eat with the men, instead taking meals in his own house and he set his empty plates down on the table with a ringing clatter. Around his mouth were flecks and spittles of food he had not bothered to wipe off.

“Why are you not at work yet?” he bellowed at the men, who were now silently looking at their hands. It was easier to talk of standing up to the bosses when the boss wasn’t standing up in front of

you. Now their minds turned to what they would do if Dow Som exiled them. All the ideas of demanding their annual gift had dried up like rice left on the fire too long.

“Come on, get out of here and get to work now before the sun hits the rooftop.”

The men did not jump to their feet and race to the door, but got up slowly and calmly, as if they were in no rush at all. It was the only thing they could do to salvage their pride.

Unlike the others Seng Nu had nothing to lose. “You should be ashamed.” She said “You tell everyone there’s no money but you’re able to find it when it comes to your house aren’t you?”. This was not like her outburst at Gum Taw, for she had not lost control and did not rage. Instead she spoke with the quiet assured confidence she had been slowly gaining in the past few months since she had arrived.

Dow Som grimaced and rubbed his knuckles against his forehead in an attempt to simmer his temper. A season ago, when Gum Taw had told him to send the girl away and not to allow her to visit the camp, he had no strong like or dislike of her. As the months went on and it became clear that she would not leave, he had developed a growing hatred dislike of the girl who disregarded rules like the birds did fences and walls. He was well aware of how silly it all must have appeared. One young girl who skipped in and out the camp and no one could stop her. Even if he ordered some of the men to carry her out, they would refuse, claiming either that her semi-wild elephant that she treated like a pet would attack them, or that she herself had some sort of power she could wield. Now she was not just disobeyed him, but she was accusing him of stealing in front of others. It just couldn’t be tolerated anymore.

Dow Som was still just a boy when his sister Mai Pan married Gum Taw and during the war against the mountain tribes, he had fought sword in hand, next to his brother in law. Looking at his rotund body these days it was hard to imagine that once he had not only been slimmer, but had been a hero of the wars, who some said could best even Gum Taw in a duel.

The fortunes of both men changed after the war. Gum Taw became headman, narrowly beating Dow Som in the Blackstone vote. Soon after Gum Taw appointed Dow Som as apprentice to the master of the timber camp. That first year, Dow Som spent most of his time in the camp office, learning how to keep records and tally up each log of timber that passed through the camp. He also had to note and check the details of each elephant that worked there, their age, their drag strength, their diet, illnesses and injuries, parents and children. Most importantly, he collected the money that arrived from the city and distributed it to the men and himself. It had been a difficult first year, but at the end of it, he was rewarded with the position of camp manager, which brought a high salary and a place of his own to live in, where he had remained ever since. He had never learned to ride an elephant because of this, though he would never admit it, he was still a bit nervous around them, and had given the task of inspection to other men, while he stayed indoors, his head in the account books. Separated from the village, he had learnt to love two things: food and giving orders. To be more precise it wasn’t the giving of the orders that he loved, it was the people obeying him and he had not grown into it ungraciously. He used to say “Could you pass me that book please “ and now he would say “Get me that book, now!”

“Get out of here you filthy orphan!” he shouted at Seng Nu, his temper boiling out and over the pot.

“Hey!” Zaw came walking out of the kitchen area to where Dow Som and Seng Nu were standing. He was still limping slightly on his bad leg, but his face was animated. “Dow Som, do not talk to a lady like that”.

“So, you’ve decided to pet the puppy that follows you around” Said Dow Som, who was now speaking more slowly and deliberately as he moved his words towards their destination. “Well you can take her with you, Zaw, because I want both of you out. You have an hour to pack your things and leave.”

Zaw took a deep breath. It was the risk he had taken, but in that moment he realised to himself that he did not feel as bad as he thought he was going to. He felt a little lightheaded. And free.

But there was no time for him to ponder the choices that life had now set up for a young unmarried man with a limp who liked to cook, because life suddenly intervened to choose for him.

“You nasty greedy old man.” It was Seng Nu. She felt anger rising within her like a carpet of leaves falling in reverse, up into the air.

Dow Som raised his hand in anger at her. It was a mistake he would regret for the rest of his life.

Before he could bring his hand down, the near wall of the cook station shattered into splinters and dust. The morning sun broke in and framed the silhouette of a giant angry beast. Pinkwetha reared up on his back legs and let out a bone-chilling roar and there was little doubt from anyone at who his anger was directed at.

Seng Nu, whose own rage had quickly dissolved, quickly made a sign and Pinkwetha came down onto four legs, resting in the doorway while puffs of steam came out his nostrils in quick furious breaths. Everyone else in the room had backed against the walls.

Except Dow Som. As soon as the elephant burst through the wall and fixed his furious eyes upon him, the camp Master had fled in terror. He was already at the gate, his legs moving faster than they had for years as he ran out of the camp and down the forest path towards the village.

It was after that, that things really changed.

“You better run!” Pinkwetha snorted in triumph as he watched the fat figure of Dow Som run out of the camp. He had known the Master since he was a calf, though respected him less than any other of the humans at Buttersweet. The human he most respected was the one he had known for the least time. He would protect her from anyone!

He watched as Zaw hugged Seng Nu. Were they a pairing now? He would have to ask Auntie Chyar. Or maybe Seng Nu would tell him. He could not speak the thorny language of humans no more than they could trumpet as he did. The men could make themselves understood with their munchy treats and occasionally with their pointy sticks, but Seng Nu was the only one who could really talk to him.

“Get the others and bring them here” she said. He did not know how she did it, because her mouth did not move, but he understood her as clearly as he would his own mother.

He scampered off into the forest, trumpeting a excited herald. Soon the other working elephants were trotting out from under the trees down the well-worn paths into the dusty ground in the centre of the camp. Auntie Chyar and Uncle Jhabow, Old Tai, his playmates Yabadeh, Japhtu and his older brother Lekwai. Then there was Auntie Pi, Auntie Chosone, Uncle Powayoke, and Uncle Jaseik. The oozies were still sat on their backs, looking confused.

Auntie Sama brought the children from the forest nursery, who were jumping and bouncing around, wrestling with their trunks and pulling each other’s tails. Uncle Jaseik walked over, his face a little frown of thunder, and they stopped as soon as they felt his shadow fall on them.

The entire camp, men and elephants were now gathered in the centre of the camp.

Pinkwetha wrapped his trunk gently around Seng Nu’s waist and lifted her up and onto his back.

She began to address the men of the camp from her high platform. She began quietly and nervously, her voice skittering from thought to thought like a mouse running between trees, but as she spoke it became louder and more solid until it was like listening to the voice of a thousand year banyan tree, or what Pinkwetha imagined a banyan tree would sound like. It was a game he played with himself on his forest trips. Willow trees spoke with faint shaky voices like whispers in the wind. Mango trees were like a storm of bells. Banana trees were delicious. No that wasn’t that a sound, that was a taste. Banana trees, they sounded like...

The cheering of the men brought him out of his reverie. Pinkwetha saw how she had taken their expressions on a journey that started at puzzled disbelief, made a detour into doubt before slowly but surely lifting them up into a determined and joyous animation

Even the elephants were now trumpeting in excitement. Rebellion was thick in the air.

“The Master isn’t the master anymore” said Seng Nu

13.

The hot season had begun and though the canopy of the forest protected its inhabitants from the direct sun, at this time of year it also served to capture and bake the air inside its leafy shell. Jasmine flowers that had bloomed a lunar month ago, struggled to make their scent stand out amidst the aromatic sea of warm rotting leaves. The heat was so strong that in the middle of the day, anything with fur, hair or hide would be snoozing and apart from the lethargic calls of the smaller birds, the forest would be silent as midnight at this time. Yet this was not a normal day nor a normal year and even in the midday heat, Buttersweet camp was alive with the sound of people moving and hammers battering on wood. Men and elephant alike were so busy at work that to the falcons that flew high above the forest, Buttersweet resembled a startled anthill.

They had claimed the camp as theirs, but knew they would have to defend it. The front gate had always been the place where the path from the forest opened out into the clearing of Buttersweet, there had never actually been a physical gate. But now they were digging foundations and planting poles and scaffolds for a wooden wall that would be almost as tall as the largest of the elephants.

Two days later, a messenger from Blackstone village arrived in the early morning with two demands: Zaw and Seng Nu were to leave the camp immediately and Pinkwetha was to be captured and killed. “The elephant is a danger to others and must be put down.”

“He’s only a danger to those who raise a hand against ladies,” spat Dai Pa at the messenger. “or perhaps a young man like yourself enjoys hitting women?”

The messenger, who had been sent by Gum Taw that morning, blushed deeply. They were not his demands. “Any men who refuse to carry out these orders will be dismissed from work” he stuttered.

“I think Dow Som and Gum Taw are mistaken” said Sutring, who was wearing a cocky smile like an unearned medal. “They can’t dismiss us. We’ve already dismissed them”

And the messenger returned to Blackstone with the laughter of thirty four men, one girl and ten elephants ringing in his ears.

The laughter did not last long. Shovels were soon handed out again and trenches continued to be dug. The sound of wood being chopped and sliced in pointed stakes was the rhythm to old songs of rebellion that rang through the camp like old bells.

Dow Som’s house was opened up and the weapons cache was found. The bows and the swords were supposed to protect the camp in case of an invasion from The Mountain, but no one could remember them ever being used.

Zaw and Seng Nu were at the timber shed, directing Pinkwetha and Chosone to carry the logs to the rapidly rising front gate. Zaw watched Seng Nu as she used her abilities to nudge and adjust the heavy stacks of timber attached to the chains. He glanced out the window and marvelled at the ant's nest of activity. "I should ask you if we are all under your spell too, Seng Nu" he said, making sure to let a layer of jest fall lightly onto his words. Although there was a tiny part of him that was curious.

"We're not under a spell, my son" said Kon with a broad smile as he arrived with Chyarmanine trotting behind him.

"And neither are the elephants!" said Seng Nu, who reached up to greet Auntie Chyar with a smile and a scratch behind the ears.

"It wasn't just the rice gift, you know that Zaw" said Kon, unstrapping the metallic chains from Chyarmanine's bulky torso. "The master has been pushing us too far for years now. Extending the logging seasons, reducing our home leave, fining us for not harvesting enough timber, even in landslide conditions. They pushed us and pushed us and now we're rolling down the other side of the mountain. We'll follow Seng Nu, not because she has enchanted us, but because we want to."

Zaw smiled at Kon's enthusiasm. The old man seemed younger these days, his eyes were bright and even his skin seemed to shine. "Uncle, are you sure you're not enchanted?"

"No he's not!" said Seng Nu and she ran over to Zaw with a fist raised as if to hit him her face obvious to the teasing.

"Don't enchant me too!" said Zaw who made a move to run, but was too slow for Seng Nu's playchase as she leapt onto his back and wrapped her arms around his head. His leg gave way and with a grunt he collapsed to the ground taking her with him. His face contorted in pain as he clutched his bad leg.

Seeing his grimace, Seng Nu leapt back and lifted her hands up in apology. "Zaw! Are you ok? I'm so sorry"

Zaw continued to grit his teeth and clench his eyebrows for a moment more, until his face unravelled into a broad smile, revealing his artifice.

"Don't do that!" yelled Seng Nu, but she was smiling too now. She leapt on him again and they rolled on the floor together for a second before they remembered they were not alone. Red-faced, they stood up brushing the dirt off and were thankful to see that Kon had already left. Only Pinkwetha remained and the young elephant giggled at them, in the way elephants do.

14.

After five days the South gate had finally been completed and it stood taller than any elephant in the camp. There were now two towers on either side that allowed for sentries to keep watch down the forest path for anyone approaching. The sides of the camp were already hemmed in by the huts and building, but the once open entrance way that led north to the river was now blocked by a trench and a thick wooden wall and a gate of its own. Additionally, around half of the camp elephants had been moved to the north end, so now anyone who managed to break the gates down at either end of Buttersweet would be met by at least five elephants, loyal to the camp who could squash them like ripe cherries underfoot.

One of the first things everyone had agreed on was that all timber pay would be distributed equally. There would also be a fund set aside that any man (or woman) could draw for in times of need. The spirit of brotherhood that flowed through the camp like a constant wind had given them energy and they marvelled at how quick they had managed to erect the defences.

Seng Nu, Kon, Zaw were eating breakfast in the cook station. Kon was eating his noodles slowly and precisely, almost one strand at a time, and was careful not to let any of the sauce spill on his tunic. Zaw was eating thoughtfully, sometimes closing his eyes as he took a mouthful, wondering if the sauce needed more or less spice next time. Seng Nu ate quickly and noisily, sucking up each noodle and talking as she ate.

Kon was using the relative lull of the morning to speak to Seng Nu on behalf of the men of the camp, who looked towards Seng Nu as a leader. There would be no lingering feelings of jealousy between them or pulling rank with her at the helm. Seng Nu had said that Buttersweet did not need a leader, that the whole point of the overthrow was so they didn't have to have masters anymore.

"I don't know anything about cutting down trees or pushing timber! I'd make a terrible master!" protested Seng Nu.

"Don't take us for fools" Said Kon. "We know perfectly well how to cut timber and push it down the river without someone telling us how. We don't need you to do that for us. But if you're the one holding the purse of jade, then they'll be less arguments between us, you see? And we were all there when you stood on top of Pinkwetha and made us see the same future. You're a natural."

"What about you Kon?" Said Seng Nu It was true that she had enjoyed the attention that came from the incident with Dow Som, but that had been spontaneous and she wasn't sure that she had the energy to give speeches and to face that attention every day. "You are the eldest here and you even fought in the Mountain wars didn't you?"

"No!" said Kon, in a tone that was louder than normal and rung final. He caught himself, took a breath and then smiled at Seng Nu. "I am old, yes, but that's not always a benefit, especially in defence. You have more fire in your eyes, girl."

“And an elephant who comes at your call like a dog” Said Zaw. “That’s always useful.”

“But this wasn’t my idea, our idea” Said Seng Nu. “If we just change the Master, then we aren’t changing anything are we?”

“Gum Taw was always the real power here.” Said Kon who had put his chopsticks down in order to gather his thoughts clearly. “Dow Som was the master, and he gave himself more than everyone else yes, but he still worked on Gum Taw’s behalf. Right now, we have not just overthrown the master, but the power behind the master too.”

“But that just means there is one less Master” Said Seng Nu. “I would have even more power than either one of them.”

“But that’s assuming that we aren’t replacing Gum Taw too.” Said Kon, a slow smile forming on his lips.

“Who?” Said Seng Nu, who had also stopped eating, enthralled as she was in the conversation.

“Everyone” Said Kon. “Including you even.” He drew a vertical line in the air, punctuating it at three levels. “Workers, Boss, Owner. that was the old system.” Then he drew a circle. “This is the new way we’ll do things.” “yes you’ll be the Master, but we’ll be the master of you too. Gum Taw owned this land, now we all do. All the men want you to be our master, not to tell us what to do, we know how to farm timber, but you’d be a symbol for us, something to inspire us.”

“And that means if you don’t like me then you can choose another person?” Said Seng Nu.

“Exactly!” Said Kon and began to eat again, satisfied he had convinced Seng Nu to accept.

“Ok” said Seng Nu. “I’ll be your symbol.”

“You have to count out the wages and distribute them too.” added Zaw.

“I don’t know how to count though!” whined Seng Nu.

“Yes you do, it’s just like making a recipe and putting the right amount of each ingredient in”.

“More importantly.” Interjected Kon “You’ll also lead us in defending the gate if we are attacked.”

“Do you think we can hold off Gum Taw if he comes?” asked Seng Nu.

“He will come and it depends how many men he can bring. If we are matched, then then I’d say we have the clear advantage in defence, but if Gum Taw can round up more, then I can’t say.”

“Don’t forget we have the elephants on our side too” said Zaw.

“Will you enchant them to fight for us Seng Nu?” said Jakan, an apprentice oozie and the youngest member of the Bittersweet team. He had just filled his bowl and sat down at the far end of the table.

“It doesn’t work like that, They are not under an enchantment” said Seng Nu. “And why are you sitting over there? Come down to our end. We won’t bite you”.

Jakan shuffled up to join them, barely hiding his smile at Seng Nu’s invitation.

“That’s a relief to him, I’m sure, given the way you eat those noodles.” Said Zaw and then ducked as Seng Nu threw her spoon at him.

“But they do what you say, don’t they?” Said Jakan, who was determined to use this time to find out the truth behind the rumours of Seng Nu’s abilities.

“Even Seng Nu wouldn’t have been able to get young Japhtu to hold still this morning while we checked under his ears for damprot” said Kon. “That elephant is a fiery one.”

“She speaks to them though!” protested Jakan, “Don’t you Seng Nu?”

“Yes that’s right. Just as I’m speaking to you right now. But I’m not enchanting you” replied Seng Nu.

“Then why do they seem to do what you say?” Said Jakan, confused.

Seng Nu gave a half shrug “Maybe it is because I ask them nicely.”

Jakan had many more questions he wanted to ask Seng Nu, especially about her rumoured ability to kick down trees, but there was no time. On the other side of the camp, the old cooking pots that had been hung by the watchtowers were being beaten.

Clang Clang Clang.

Everyone seemed to take a deep breath at once.

Gum Taw had returned.

Zaw climbed the watchtower, reasoning that if battle was to break out he would not be able to move very fast on his legs, so he would be of most use in a stationary position, even if it did leave him a little exposed. A quiver of arrows and a bow were strapped to his back and he was both excited and afraid to be in a situation where he might have to use them.

When he reached the top he peered over cautiously towards the other side of the wall and counted twenty three men, led by Gum Taw with Dow Som near behind him.

They were close to the wall, well within an arrow's distance, which suggested they did not expect to fight.

"Who am speaking to?" boomed Gum Taw to the wall. Some of the men behind the camp walls breathed a sigh of relief, as the bright tone of his voice did not suggest a man who was about to launch an attack. However, the more perceptive in the camp could hear that behind that friendly tone was a simmering anger he was trying hard to keep in check. No one had ever defied him before and it felt like an attack on his very self that they would dare to stand against them. His name was in danger.

"Speak to all of us" said a voice from the wall

"Is that Danh I can hear? Danh, cousin of mine! Come out from behind this wall and lets talk. Don't you remember how happy you were when I gave you this job?"

"Yes I was happy then" said Danh "But then you told Dow Som to make us work an extra four days a month."

"And we didn't even get anything extra in our purses for it" Added Kon, shouting over the wall. s

"Kon! is that you my old friend? remember when we fought together on the mountain slopes? We were brothers then!" Gum Taw could not see Kon through the wall, but he held his arms open in a gesture of friendship.

Kon peered at Gum Taw through a gap in the wood. For almost twenty years he had tried to forget that war, but guilt was like a nail that kept the memory pinned to the wall of his soul. He could not tell you why they were fighting, but he remembered with crystal clarity the look in the boy's eyes as Kon's sword drove into his chest. How the pupils skittered with fear and then froze, forever, into hopelessness. They had won that battle on those heathered mountain crags eighteen years ago and

then they brought sunset to the Mountain town. Gum Taw led with a burning torch in his hand his eyes inflamed with a new lust.

Kon did not participate, they knew it was not his nature, so they set him on guard duty, made him complicit, and he watched the moon turn red. He had gone home after the war. Cried. Cried more. His older brother had inherited the family homestead so he went to work as an oozie, which suited him fine, he was glad to be away from everyone. Yet even in the forest, the sound of a log cracking on the fire, the smell of the mountain heather on the eastern wind, or when an elephant's wail found that uncanny tone that sounded like a women's cry, the memory would rush back to him and he would collapse in a bundle of panic and shame.

On that day it was the wild glint in Gum Taw's eye that triggered the memory that haunted Kon like the roots of a tree haunt the soil. He didn't collapse this time, the Buttersweet rebellion had given him courage. He climbed to the top of the guard tower and looked Gum Taw in the eye. He body shook as he shouted but he does not break eye contact.

"You were never my brother, you were and you are a disgusting, low, man. You speak of brothers and friends, but you treated us as little more than the elephants, just animals that make money for you." "Well that time is over. This isn't your camp anymore. It's all of ours. We've worked here for years, it belongs to us."

Gum Taw's lips rotated as if he was chewing a particularly tough piece of fat and then his face stuck in a snarl as he spoke.

"This is my land. My camp. My elephants. Not yours."

From behind the gate, Seng Nu's head appeared then she glided upwards until most of her body was visible. The men behind Gum Taw recoiled slightly. They had heard the rumours of a girl who lived in the forest who could bend trees and twist the minds of men and now there in front of them was a girl who seemed to be floating in front of their eyes.

Dow Som's flabby hand shook as he pointed at her.

"The Enchantress! She flies!" he yelled and threw a handful of salt in Seng Nu's direction.

"Who gave you this land?" She said, ignoring Dow Som and looking directly at Gum Taw who met her eyes with a glare that seemed to drip molten iron.

"It is my great grandfather's land, and it passed to me as it should" he growled.

“And how did he come by it? Did he find it in his pocket?” There were a few ripples of laughter from behind the wall.

“He fought for it.” He said, his voice low and simmering as if he knew what Seng Nu would say next.

“Well, if you want it now, you’ll have to fight *us* for it!” said Seng Nu in triumph and there were sounds of cheering from behind the wall. Seng Nu rose even higher until her whole body was above the wall. She was standing on the tip of an elephant’s trunk which was lifting her up above the gate. She stepped backwards onto the crest of his brow and the elephant raised his head to join with the cheering.

15.

The men of Buttersweet camp were making a show of waving their arrows and swords defiantly, but in truth they really didn’t want to fight. The younger had grown up playing war games with wooden swords and hearing tales of their fathers and uncles fighting, but as the water reached boiling point, the reality fast approaching, that they would have to use real swords and stick them into real human bodies was not appealing. Many of the men waiting outside the gate, under Gum Taw’s command, were having similar thoughts. They had been told they would be given jade for some guard duty, not to lay siege to a camp defended by men and elephants. Then there were the older men, the ones who had fought in the Mountain war. They also did not want to fight, as they knew the reality of war. They still remembered what it was like to hear men crying.

There were only two men with blood in their vision. Dow Som had fought many years ago in the wars against the Mountain clans. Overtime his memory had cloven itself in two, discarding the blood and the pain and retaining only an image of himself as a brave and bold young man who wielded a sword as if he had just stepped straight from a folk song about heroes. He was not delusional enough to think that at his age he could still fight with his youthful speed and vigour, but he was clutching a dagger in his hands and vowed to stick it in the first person to come over that wall. He had been shamed by the loss of Buttersweet and wanted to prove himself.

Gum Taw was also ready to draw blood if needed. His reputation was at stake. Just a few days ago the name Hkanna Gum Taw meant strength and power, not just in the village, but the whole valley. If Gum Taw didn’t reverse what had happened then he would be known as the man who a lost a rebellion. He was older for sure, but if he could fight half as well as his reputation then he would easily win back Buttersweet. Strapped to his back was a longsword that was as long as his armspan and weighed almost as much as a blacksmith’s anvil. He drew it and passed the length of the blade past his face, inspecting every inch of the sharpened edge. But then he looked up to the wall again, a different expression on his face. He would try one last time to resolve this.

“I have been harsh in the past” he said, aiming his voice towards softness. “I have made mistakes” he stuck sword into the ground and walked in front of it.

“I will raise your pay and two extra days holidays a year.”

There was silence from behind the wall. The men in the guardtowers did not meet his eyes

“Okay! You have fought hard for your money. Your pay will be doubled!” He held his arms out and his face was warm.

The men on the other side of the wall still did not respond. There were quizzical looks and raised eyebrows as they realised that for Gum Taw to offer double their pay, the camp must have been more profitable for him than they had previously realised.

“And the girl can stay too!” Said Gum Taw, with a flourish like a bamberry on top of a sweetcake.

What Gum Taw didn't understand was that the time for bargaining had gone. What lifted hearts now was not just money, but pride. When land was something that only one man could own, then pride was like a cake to be divided. But when the land was owned by the men who worked on it, when all men owned all the land together, then pride was infinite and did not decay no matter how many joined. They shared the land the way the trees shared sunshine. Gum Taw could have offered them a year of holiday with full pay and they wouldn't have accepted, because now they knew what it felt like to work for oneself and were prepared to fight to defend what they had found.

The men behind the wall roared again in defiance of Gum Taw's offer. Gum Taw picked up his sword and with a hand motion called the men behind him forward. They did not unsheath their swords or nock their bows, but instead took out woodsman's axes. Seng Nu, watching from the top of the gate noted with some puzzlement that each axe handle had been freshly painted in different colours.

The men walked up to the wooden wall and began hacking at it with their axes. The Buttersweet men in the watchtowers fired their arrows, but they simply bounced off the large metallic shields that were being held up on either side of the attacking group.

There were sounds of wood splintering and cracking as the gate that Buttersweet had built started to falter. The men behind the gate, who were elephant riders not fighters, began to feel their courage dripping away from them and the grip on their swords and whips loosened as they looked to each other for direction. They looked up to Seng Nu, still on the back of Pinkwetha. She did not say anything but turned and rode him away from the gate, his feet kicking up dust as he galloped to the north.

Seng Nu and Pinkwetha reached the northern gate of Buttersweet and she called out to the sentry in the watchtower.

“Is anyone outside?”

“No one”, came the answer from the guard.

The gate opened on its hinges and Seng Nu rode Pinkwetha out. She turned him around and they dashed along the outer walls, hoping to smash into the side of Gum Taw’s men. Their shields would not stop an elephant.

As they approached the gate, she could see that the men with axes had almost broken through the gate. She tapped Pinkwetha on the head and he lifted his trunk, blasting out a loud thunderous wail that stopped the men in their tracks.

They charged towards them and the men scattered into two, like a flock of sparrows before a falcon. They moved not back and away but to the side. “Now” barked Gum Taw in command and then in one sickening moment, the men on either flank of the elephant let their axes fly all at once. Every single one targeting Pinkwetha’s eyes.

Time did not slow down for anyone, it even seemed to speed up, snatching away any chance of shielding. One moment the elephant was bounding with giddy energy, the next there were cold metal axe head buried into the side of his skull.

Pinkwetha wailed a furious cry and Seng Nu was sent flying to the ground as he bucked and spun in agony. Most of the blades had failed to hit, but only a few were needed to hit their mark.

The men ran back to the safety of the trees to where a smiling Gum Taw was standing. He had known that if he was to stand any chance of winning back the camp, he had to remove the elephant that took orders from the forest girl. And she had taken the bait he set when he send the men to hack away at the gate.

Seng Nu lay in the grass, her chest feeling like it had exploded. She rolled over in agony and saw the thick tree trunk legs of Pinkwetha stampeding towards as her as the elephant raged. Even if her lungs had air, there was no time to shout out. Pinkwetha was running blindly towards her and his feet were so heavy she was bouncing off the ground. She closed her eyes and tried not to think of the pain.

Somehow he ran right over her, but the stamps of his feet missed her.

Gum Taw ducked behind a thick oak as the wailing Pinkwetha stampeded past him. He noted the colours of the axe handles still embedded in the poor creature’s eyes.

“River Blue on the right side and Lily green on the left! One extra purse for Tu and Ze” He said and both Tu and Ze were slapped heartily on the back by their fellow soldiers in celebration of their aim.

“Get her!” said Gum Taw, pointing towards the young girl whose eyes were still vague and in shock as she slowly dragged herself to her feet. Then she realises what they have done to her friend and what are they are trying to do to her and everyone else.

Rage runs up Seng Nu’s spine and grips her skull like a crown of thorns. She sends out a message of vengeance to the forest and the words wrap around the trees like a tight vine, invisible to all but her. Suddenly there is a terrible snapping and cracking and the trees collapse. They are falling inwards like rows of falling hammers and the men who have no time to even raise their shields or shout a warning to others. Some try to run, others try to duck, while a few are too stunned to do anything but gape as the huge wooden giants fall on them like a pack of wolves on a wounded deer. Only Seng Nu is able to escape them and she hops and jumps over and under the falling timber, moving effortlessly like water through a hole in a dam, and not a single one touches her.

Seng Nu stumbled back to the gate a huge new clearing of trees behind her. Zaw opened the gate and catches her before she falls.

The men from Buttersweet called the elephants in to help lift the tree trunks, and felt sick with the destruction of bodies they found beneath. But there, buried beneath his own men was the shaken figure of a defeated Gum Taw. He begged for his life, but the men had no intention of doing anything but letting him run back down the path out of the forest.

Six years previously

After Lum Naw had showed Seng Nu her ability to make an apple pop and fall from a tree, Seng Nu was keen for Lum Naw to teach her. As they walked back to the cottage, She slowed herself to walk alongside Naw. But she already knew that the lesson had already started, so waited for instruction. When they got back, Naw sank into a chair, while Seng Nu lit the stove. Later they sat, drinking cups of steaming herbal tea and watching the world wake up. This was their usual morning routine and they passed it in silence. They could sit together for hours, even days without talking, without feeling the least bit uncomfortable.

“Seng Nu, what do you hear?” said Naw as she sipped her tea.

Seng Nu couldn’t remember the last time Naw had asked her a question. Normally it was her that did the asking. Naw knew so much.

“I can hear a crow...maybe twenty trees away. The stove is bubbling, I can hear that. A bug..I think it’s a bee, maybe a wasp. it’s buzzing somewhere behind the house, actually there are two of them.”

“Your ears work better than mine.” said Naw. “That’s good. But listen without them.”

Seng Nu didn’t understand.

“Hear what makes no sound” said Naw, taking a deep draught of forest air and closing her eyes.

Seng Nu closed her eyes too and tried to listen without her ears. She could hear the two bees still buzzing behind the house and tuned them out, trying to focus. The water on the porch stove was simmering. Dupadupadoopadupadoopa it said, and as she concentrated she started to hear each individual bubble of boiling water pop at the surface. Dup dup doop dupa doop.

“You’re still hearing sounds anyone can hear” said Naw. “Let me give you a different way to think of it. When the panther is hunting in the forest, when she is looking for that first track to follow, you might think that her mind is as tense as her body. But it’s not. Instead she keeps her eyes and ears open and lets the forest come to her. And it’s the back of her mind that notices those little things out of place, the sapling that is curled just a little too unnaturally, the pad of hooves on dry leaves in the distance, the way the low branches sway after something other than wind moves them. She does not search for these things like a squirrel searches each branch of a tree for a nut, but she finds them like the snake who sleeps with his eyes open, unthinking but ready to pounce if something comes near.”

“The panther is looking for deer, what am I trying to find?” Said Seng Nu.

“The panther looks at the whole picture and lets the details come to them. You must look at the whole picture and let its own voice come to you.”

Seng Nu didn’t exactly understand but she tried again, tuning out the bees and the bubbling pot, the squawking crow and everything else. She felt her body tense as it strained to hear what could not be heard. Then she let it relax. Soon she heard something.. It was faint, as though it was coming from far away, but it was there, she could hear it. It was a rumbling, softer than thunder but deeper than rain. It was a pure sound, with no beginnings or endings. It rushed on, unbroken.

Seng Nu opened her eyes. Naw was looking at her.

“So?” Said the old woman, her eyes faintly twinkling behind their misted glassy windows. “did you hear something else?”

“I heard something” Said Seng Nu, “a rushing rumble. It was far away but I heard it, it felt so real, but...” She bit her lip and looked anxiously towards Naw for confirmation.

“Interesting” said Naw. “you have good hearing”

“So...I did it?” Said Seng Nu

“no, you heard the river.” said Naw. Seng Nu slumped down in her chair “don’t expect to get it straight away. It took me years.” She sighed. “I should have begun teaching you this earlier”.

“What happens when I hear it?” Said Seng Nu.

“You speak back to it”

“and then?”

“and then you can work with it. Once you find the whole picture, then you will be able to find the smaller voices. The trees, the leaves, the rocks and the branches.”

Naw put her tea down and pushed herself up to her feet with a groan and walked over to Seng Nu.

“Show me the bruise”.

Seng Nu hesitated. Then she drew up the sleeve of her tunic. There on her arm was a faded purpley mark. The same colour as an apple from the tree.

“You went to the camp” she said. It was not to scold, not to warn, simply to confirm. Seng Nu said nothing but nodded.

Naw knew there wasn’t much time. She had taken responsibility of a child who was becoming a young woman. There was beauty in that. But there was danger too.

Putting a hand on Seng Nu’s chin and gently lifting it, she looked into the young girl’s eyes.

“Did they hurt you anywhere else?”

Seng Nu shook her head before Naw could finish the question. “I just wanted to speak to them, but they grabbed me.”

“And then?”

“I shook them off and I ran” said Seng Nu, and as the memory of fear became fear itself, she began to cry.

Naw put an arm around her, one that comforted Seng Nu and also hid her own tears. After a while she let go and went into the house. She came out pulling a cloak around her shoulders and carrying some freshly cut leaves in her other hand. "Mix these with water and then rub them into your arm" she said, handing them to Seng Nu. "They will help the bruising go down."

And then she walked off down the forest path. "I'll be back soon, don't worry" she said, and Seng Nu noticed that although she still walked with a hunch and a limp, her legs seemed to stride with a purpose.

A few hours later she returned. She was no longer striding, but she hobbled slowly down the path to the house. She looked up at Seng Nu and smiled. It wasn't the awkward forced smile of a woman trying to make a scared child feel welcome in her home. It was a real one, an unconscious expression of relief

Seng Nu had set their table. Wild yams and red berries and then green apples and honey for after. She helped Naw into her chair, and waited until they had finished eating to ask where she had been, even though she already knew the answer.

"I snapped a tree in half," said Naw. "And then told them I'd do the same to any arm that touched things it shouldn't."

They ate in comfortable silence and then Naw went to sit outside while Seng Nu put a pan of water on the stove to boil for a tea. Then she joined Naw and they sat outside to watch the forest dimming. The bubbles in the boiling stove went dup dup dup dup.

"Poor tree". Said Seng Nu.

And two bells rang out to herald the sunset.

It was still dark when Seng Nu woke up that night with the feeling that something was missing. There was an absence. She knelt next to Naw, who still had a daisy in her hair, though the white petals had begun to curl like tiny grasping fingers. Not knowing why, she kissed Naw on the forehead and thanked her without words.

Stepping out the house, her body shivered in the chill of the night. It would be dawn soon, she could feel it, even though everywhere was dark. She looked out into the darkness. How many had died tonight, here in the forest? She heard the cry of a nocturnal bird. The restless wings of nightbugs flying behind the house. The everwake river rumbled in the distance.

She listened harder, straining to hear the unheard. And then she let go, her whole body exhaling, emptying herself of everything but her core being, which too opened up like a breaking anchor.

And then just as the deep black of the night was giving way to the blue of the forest before dawn she had felt it. The world waking up.

After the battle 16.5

The morning sun was doing its best to gift Seng Nu with light and warmth. It peeked through the curtains of her room and spread itself out on her bed like a present. But Seng Nu did not want to know about the world. Since the Battle of the Gate, a whole season had passed, the rains had come and gone, but she still felt the guilt weighing her down like a stone in the stomach.

She would only come out from under the bed covers for Zaw, who walked across the camp three times a day to bring her meals. Usually he brought them in steaming bowls and plates, but today, he was carrying a bundle of rice and snacks, wrapped up in banana leaf and tied with thin twine.

Zaw walked up the steps to what had been the former masters house, where Seng Nu now lived. She had made a token humble protest about being placed here, saying it was too big for one girl, but neither her nor the men would have tolerated her staying in the cramped dormitories. Zaw climbed the thick beechwood stairs. This was the worst part of his day. He could walk perfectly fine on the flat ground, but climbing the stairs reminded his leg that it had been injured not that long ago and he had to slow himself all the way down to a near crawling pace as he took the stairs one at a time.

Finally he came to Seng Nu's room and composed himself, putting on his most cheerful face as though he was putting on a tight yet well worn pair of boots. He knocked and opened the door.

"Come on" He said, doing his best to sound warm as he opened the door. "We're going to see the elephants"

"Where do you think we are?" came the muffled voice from under the bedcovers. "I can look out the window anytime and see one."

"Not like the ones I'm going to show you" said Zaw, trying resolutely cheery. He wondered if he should just whip the covers off and carry Seng Nu himself. then decided that would probably overstep the line.

“What’s so special about them?” Said Seng Nu. “Are they pink?” She sat up and let the cover fall revealing a face that was creased and torn around the eyes. She had been crying not long ago.

“Well actually it’s the same elephants you know from here. Chyar will be there, and Jhabow of course, Pinkwetha too. It’s their off day today you know. It’s not who they are, it’s what they are doing that is so special. Come on, you’ll love it. I’ve even cooked your favourite, greenhoof curry” He held the bundle wrapped in banana leaves up and the soft smell wafted through the room. Seng Nu sat up a little straighter.

“Just leave it here, Zaw .I don’t feel like going out.” She said. “I’ll eat it from the leaf if there is no plate.”

“Seng Nu. You haven’t been out in a month. If you want it, you’re going to have to come out with me.” Zaw wafted the bundle even closer to Seng Nu’s face and then snatched it away as he made a quick turn. He stopped at the doorway and looked back. “I know you feel bad about what happened, Seng Nu. But I promise you won’t feel better if you stay here for the rest of your life. Come on, we all care about you. I care about you.”

The last words seemed to stir her and she sighed and sighed again, but slowly she moved up. “Fine.” she said, standing up and shaking herself with a shiver.

Zaw walked out and took the steps again “I’ll let you get ready. Hurry up.”

Soon they were both outside and walking out the north gate into the forest.

“I wasn’t going to stay in bed for the rest of my life, you know” said Seng Nu. “Just another month maybe.”

“I guess you like having me bring you breakfast in bed” said Zaw.

“And lunch and dinner too”

“I knew it!”

They walked silently for a while. At this time of year, it never was as cold here in the low forest as it was up on the eastern mountains, but even so, the bark on the trees seemed to hug itself a little tighter in this season, drawing their leaves in a little more snugly and saving their fruit for the new years. The birds too appeared to be more cautious and measured in their movements, only venturing down off their branches and nest to the ground when they were absolutely sure there was a worm or a ripe berry for the plucking. Petals and nectar were only winter dreams for most of the flowers who saved their energy for a summer bloom and yet there were a few plants who chose to flower at this

time of year. The daisystars were out, tiny flowers of silver no bigger than a twinkle that bloomed in their thousands across the forest floor. There were orchids too here in the cold forest, that opened their cups at this time of year to sate the thirst of the furry legged moths who flew between the cold trees.

“You said that I would feel better if I came out today.” Said Seng Nu. They had reached the river bank and were walking east along the banks. “And you’re right, it is good to breathe the air here. And to be with you. But that is what I was afraid of.”

“I don’t understand” said Zaw.

“It feels bad to be happy.” said Seng Nu and then looked at Zaw for the briefest of moments only to quickly turn her face away. “It feels bad to be happy when those men aren’t here.”

“Which men?” asked Zaw.

“The ones I killed!” Seng Nu collapsed to her knees and dug the heels of her palms into her eyes to wipe away the tears that hadn’t yet formed and to hide herself from Zaw. “How can I be happy after what I have done? It can’t be right Zaw. To do what I did, and to go on. While they are left behind as the world turns.”

Zaw knelt down beside her and placed an arm around her. He rubbed her back gently as she let go of the tears. They were still close, more close a pairing than any two souls in the forest. But Since the battle, Seng Nu’s withdrawal had put a hold on things going further. Zaw wished they could meet each other’s smiles again. “It’s not your fault Seng Nu. Gum Taw and those men, they would have done the same to us you know. You saw the way Gum Taw held that sword. How he spoke about us. You did what you had to do. For all of us.”

“I was angry at what they did to Pinkwetha, but it felt like I wasn’t myself, like I was watching myself doing something I couldn’t stop. What if it happens again? What if I can’t control myself?”

Zaw leaned in and hugged Seng Nu close. “It won’t. Because I know you aren’t that person.”

Zaw held Seng Nu and he held her for a long time, there on the forest floor. For both of them, the dusty forest floor felt like the most comfortable place in the world.

After a while the silence was broken by a crashing splashing sound coming from further down the river. Seng Nu wanted to ignore it, but after a short time, she heard it again. Normally only the timber hitting the river made that sort of sound, but it was not the rainy season yet and the logs were not ready to travel.

“What is that sound?” She asked.

“That’s what I wanted to show you” Said Zaw. “Come on.” He took her by the hand and led her further up the river path.

They finally came to a curve in the river where a lagoon had formed by the banks. It was deep even in the dry season and the elephants came here to bathe and be bathed year round. Old grandfather Tai had propped himself up against the bank, his lower legs in the water. The position didn’t look comfortable to Seng Nu but he had his eyes closed and looked blissful enough. On the other side of the lagoon, some of the younger elephants were playing, squirting each other with water from their trunks and pushing and shoving each other in the merry way that only children can do.

“So what did you bring me here to see?” Asked Seng Nu. In fact she was more than satisfied to have come to the forest with Zaw today and didn’t even care if the promise of something special had been just a trick to get her out the house. She had already shared something special with Zaw now.

“Look over there.” Zaw pointed to the far end of the lagoon where the thick willow trees hung over the water like sentinels. Between them was another wooden structure, not a tree but a platform of sorts. “We built it for them.”

It was a huge piece of polished wood that must have been made from many trees put together. It was almost as wide as the huts and was held at a curving angle so that the bottom of it dipped just above the surface of the water while the other end stretched up and away into the forest almost reaching the very tops of the trees. It was polished smooth and was wet, even though it had not been raining.

Seng Nu frowned and tilted her head to try and understanding “What is...”

But at that moment her question was answered for her. At the very top of the platform she saw a black shadow in the unmistakable shape of an elephant. Her mouth dropped open.

“There’s a hill behind, so they can climb up” Said Zaw, anticipating her question.

And then the elephant, high upon the platform, sat his bottom down on the wood. And began to move towards them, sliding down the ramp, picking up speed. As he reached the end, the curve lifted him up and he sailed above the lagoon for a short distance before landing with a heavy splash in the centre, sending thick blooms of water into the air above the pool

He raised his trunk and squealed merrily.

Zaw had a proud expression as he turned to Seng Nu, after all the elephant lagoon slide had been his idea. “What do you think?” He asked.

But Seng Nu was already off, racing around the pool towards the slide. “I want to try it!” she yelled in delight.

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The cold season kept turning in the forest, until the heat started to seep in with the spring. Jasmine bloomed all the year round, but the spring flowers had a scent that was sweeter than any other time of year. Trees that had been ringed a year before were cut down and set to rest on the high banks of the river. Old trees were marked for next year's harvest and saplings were planted. Then the heat came and lasted so long that everyone forgot what it was like to be cool. Finally the circle caught itself up and the rains came again. The banks of the river swelled and the water rose up the banks to take the logs and send them down the river, where they sailed out of the forest and past the plains before finally reaching The City. A place no one from Buttersweet had ever been.

“Roseberry! Roseberry!” came a merry shout from the watchtower at the gate and soon that one voice became many and men all over Buttersweet were chanting the words in a rising and falling melody. A cheer went up as a flock of doves came into view above the camp and the men ran to the edges of the forest where the thickets of wild Roseberry grew. The doves came in to land at the rear of the large house at the north of the camp, where they had landed each season past for years.

The men returned from the forest and stood outside the house, lightly jostling each other for position. To an outsider it might have looked as if they were prospective suitors for her hand in marriage, as each one was cradling a branch or sprig of Roseberry and holding an expectant, enthusiastic look on their faces. It was not a necessity to feed them this particular plant, the doves would fly back to the City after a few days rest whether they ate Roseberry or not. Yet it was because it was unnecessary that the act had gained meaning and was now a firm pillar of Buttersweet culture. Roseberry was the favourite treat of the doves.

After the river sent the wood to the City, The City needed to send the payment to the forest. The City was at least ten days walk from Blackstone village and neither the men of Buttersweet nor the men of the city wanted to be away from their home for that long. The solution had been to send doves, trained and bred to fly great distances, with little bags tied to their legs. Inside were pieces of jade carved into delicate leaves. Each piece was the only the size of a man's thumb and cut so thin you could see right through it. The jade leaves could be traded in The Valley for goods. When the system started it had taken a while for the people of The Valley to accept the leaves from the elephant camp workers, but they had come to accept it. In the early days, the men from The City circulated an announcement that if they brought thirty leaves to the city it would be exchanged for

one ox. Of course no one ever actually hiked to The City to trade their jade pieces, but the promise had meant they began to accept the pieces for trade, until quickly they had forgotten all about the ox and began to think only in terms of the jade leaves.

Many in the camp had wondered if the agreement with The City would still hold. Perhaps Gum Taw had sent messengers there to tell them of the rebellion. After the logs had sailed down the river there was an anxious month waiting for the winged reply, but here it was, The City seemed not to care who sent them the timber, as long as they received it. The shouts from the men were more joyous than years past. This was their earnings and they wouldn't be sharing it with a boss and landowners who did nothing to earn it.

When all the doves had landed, Seng Nu took the small iron key from around her neck, and opened a lock box. Inside the box was another key which she used to open the door to the rear balcony that looked out onto the northern forest. Perched on beams and waddling on the floor were fifty exhausted doves, softly cooing in expectation.

After she had taken each bag from around the ankles of the doves, she laid out the jade pieces on the wooden table that stood in the entrance hall of the house. It was simple enough to count each piece out and then she divided the total into separate bundles for each of the thirty or so men who worked in the camp. Each of them came, picked up their bundle and went upstairs to the balcony to feed the birds.

Since the Battle At The Gate, Seng Nu had felt guilt like a stone in her stomach. Not a day passed when she didn't think about the men who had perished under her trees she had forced down. She thought of their families too. Their hopes and dreams which were now scattered to the wind like the particles of crushed dry leaves. She had never intended to use her powers that way. She had thought to use them only to scare or block, not to kill. But a rage had gripped her and she had lost control.

For the months after she had rarely left the master's house, and would not make eye contact with anyone except Zaw. She had seen her potential now, knew that she could and had used her power for destruction and part of her worried that being in the world might awaken that killing rage again. The men of the camp too were upset at how things turned out at the Gate, almost every man at the camp knew one or two of the dead soldiers as a relative or clan cousin. There were some dark hints among some that with Gum Taw's escape, the wrong man had survived. Few blamed Seng Nu for what had happened, although the younger men were more cautious around her. Some of the older men, who had seen battle before, thought her and the others naive to expect that it wouldn't have ended this way. They had never wanted to kill either, but knew from experience that claims to land often ended in bloodshed. They too had seen friends cut down in battle and knew what it was like to feel the red rage.

She was not a leader in the way Dow Som was. She simply organised certain things, like the distribution of the jade, and the storing of the workers fund. She had the responsibility to take stock and her ability to harness the power of the forest didn't mean she could skip learning how to take stock reports. She learnt how to mix and knead numbers together until there was a figure that equalled their value in Jade. It was a different type of magic. She did not take any jade for herself, claiming that the forest had fed her all her life and she couldn't eat a stone. But the men, especially

the older ones, made her put aside some for herself, saying she might need it one day. Seng Nu put them in a box under her bed.

She was also, undoubtedly, the champion of the camp, although this was unspoken. Even though there had been bloodshed, there was a feeling of pride in Buttersweet that Seng Nu had protected them in a way that no one else could have. It almost felt like a reward for the years they had spent toiling for timber.

Zaw had joined her in the masters house. Her cottage in the woods was now empty. There were a few grumblings in the camp. an unmarried man and woman living together was unheard of in the Valley, although it was pointed to the muttering voices that they could barely complain about tradition when they had rebelled against Buttersweet's landholder the previous year.

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After everything had been paid out, the camp was in high spirits. Zaw stood on the front verandah of the masters house, deep in thought.

"What's the matter?" said Seng Nu walking over to him and as she approached he drew his arm around her waist pulling her in, but kept his eyes forward his expression still serious.

"Where are they going to spend their earnings?" he said in a tone suggesting that the answer was nowhere near.

Seng Nu nuzzled her head into his side. "They won't go to Blackstone, but there are plenty of other villages"

"There are, but the men that Gum Taw brought here with him to the Battle came from those other villages too."

Seng Nu clung to Zaw for a few more silent moments, and then without warning sprang up and ran to the parade ground and whistled loud for attention. She was no longer the quiet mouse that she had been when she first came to Buttersweet.

Pinkwetha came trundling from the north stable at her whistle. He had never regained his sight and Seng Nu had tied a thick strip of red cloth around his head to cover the empty wounds around his eyes. Even she could not heal him. But with his blindness, he had learnt to get around the camp without bumping into anything. His banana leaf ears and his thick vine of a trunk helped him hear and feel his way around. And his nose would always lead him in the direction of freshly snapped sugar cane. Some of the men joked that he must have an extra pair of eyes in his mouth.

Pinkwetha lifted Seng Nu onto his back and then she gave a second whistle, this one for the humans, who soon circled her

She held out a pouch.

“This is my share of this season’s payment” She said and tipped it up, letting the jade pieces tumble onto the dusty ground.

Take it with you when you go to the Valley towns and distribute it among the families of the men who fell at the gate. This will bring us...” she struggled to find the right word

“Fortune?” ventured someone.

“Protection?” came a more cynical voice.

“It will not bring us anything.” Said Zaw. Some of the eyes in the crowd widened at the site of Zaw of all people openly contradicting Seng Nu who had adopted a puzzled look herself.

“It will not bring us anything. Nothing we can hold, nothing we can use. For now at least. But it is the right thing to do” Said Zaw, and he took out his own pouch. “I cannot walk far enough to see this done, but take my Jade pieces too and see they are given to the families.”

“And what of our families?” said a voice in the crowd. “We have worked hard and now we cannot share our fruit with them?”

“Of course you can” said Seng Nu. “What you do with your jade is up to you. Maybe some of you might give just a little. We have had a good return this year.”

“Those men knew what they were doing when they came here. They knew the risks”. Said young Sutring, who was in his second year and was not eager to share his prize with anyone. He was only a year younger than Zaw and spoke as though he was eager to prove himself.

“I think you are forgetting that without Seng Nu here you would have had less in your hand than you have now” Said Kon, who looked sternly at the junior.

“Kon is right, Seng Nu took an equal share of Jade, not a masters portion” Said Dai Pa, doing his best to walk the line between paternal and strict. “With her as master we have more for ourselves than ever. Listen to what she says.”

Sutring tilted his head and let his thick straw hair dangle over his eyes, partly in defiance, partly to avoid having to look either in the eye. “She is not the master here.” He said. “We are all masters, isn’t that what we...” but he let his words fall to the floor as his elders glared at him.

“Wait”. Said Seng Nu. “Danh, thank you, but Sutring is right. I am not the master here.” She put a hand on Sutring’s shoulder. “Never be afraid to speak your mind.” she said, looking him in the eye. Then she let go and looked to the rest of the men. “We are all equal here.”

“Then why are you ordering us to give our money to the families of men who tried to kill us?” came another voice.

“I’m not ordering you” said Seng Nu, her voice started to waver again. “You can do what you want!”.

Zaw had stepped in again to speak. “None of us have to give a portion of our jade to those men’s families. Seng Nu is not commanding you. Has she ever forced you to do anything? She is making a suggestion. When we ran Gum Taw out of here and took the camp for ourselves, didn’t we say this would be a different place? Or did we just create more Gum Taw’s, hoarding our money close and only looking after our close kin?”

“The boy speaks well” said Kon. “we must show the Valley we are different, that what we have made here is not just a change in our wealth, but in our hearts too.” and he took out a piece of jade from his shoulder bag and held it up for the camp to see.

Seng Nu interrupted. “Wait. I do not want to see who will give and who will not. No one should feel pressured by the eyes of the others. I will leave a bag next to the door of my house. Put your jade in there if you want to.”

Zaw raised a hand. “what if someone steals from the bag?”

There were grumbles and expressions of hurt from around the gathering.

“Well a crow might stick his beak in!” Zaw protested.

“Like this?” said Jakan who made his fingers rigid and snapped them towards Zaw’s nose. The tension of the afternoon broke as everyone else joined in, laughing as they chased each other with their own snapping crow beak hands and wrestled in the dust.

Kon stepped aside to speak to Seng Nu. “I’ll make a lockbox for you with a hole in the top that will let jade in, but stop any hands or beaks from taking it out.”

At the end of the week, Seng Nu calculated that just over half of the camp had donated to the families fund.

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Zaw was outside the old master's house chopping vegetables for the evening meal. In the brotherly spirit of the new camp, all meals were now held at the front of the large house instead of the kitchen area. The hot season was almost over and after sunset, a cool refreshing wind would blow through the forest. The beetles who spent their days lounging on leaves were making way for the crickets, who would take the night shift on those same pieces of land. Overhead, clouds had begun to form but if the earth had not yet been quenched by the sky's gift of rain, there would be enough hot food and palm wine to keep everyone warm.

"Thanks for today". After the Seng Nu had been at the river that evening, helping to give the elephant's their weekly bath. As she sat by and her hair was still wet and smelled of the lemony chomaleaves they used to make a lather.

"Not a worry" Said Zaw, keeping his eyes on the greenhoof he was carving into delicate flowers. Despite Seng Nu's insistence that the root vegetable was edible, he decided it worked better as a decoration.

"We make a good team don't we?" she said and jumped forward to wrap her arms around Zaw and planted a long kiss on his cheek, edging her lips around his face till they met with his own. Zaw tried to keep cutting vegetables but eventually dropped knife and spun round to embrace Seng Nu.

"Remember to lock the doves up tonight." Said Zaw

"It feels wrong to keep birds caged up like that." Seng Nu replied.

"I'm sure they don't mind having a metal bar between them and the beasts that come out at night in the jungle. They'll have their freedom next week when they fly back to the city"

"And the bars will also protect them from any cooks who want to serve up dove curry tonight!"

"Don't give me any ideas!"

"Zaw" said Seng Nu and gave him a serious look.

"What is it?" he said.

“Are people scared of me?”

“No. Why would they be scared of you?” Zaw squeezed her waist and kissed Seng Nu on the top of her head.

“Sutring. Today after he spoke out, he gave me a look. Like he regretted saying what he had.”

“Well maybe he did regret it.”

“No. I mean it wasn't as if he didn't believe it, he regretted it because he was afraid. Afraid I might go into a rage and knock a tree down on him.”

“I'm sure he didn't think that.”

“Sometimes I think that.” Seng Nu buried her face into Zaw's chest and her speech was muffled by his tunic and her tears. “At the Gate, when I brought down those trees, I did not plan that. To feel that angry. It felt like I was exploding. I could not stop myself. Sometimes I am afraid of myself, Zaw. Sometimes I am afraid of myself.”

Zaw did not know what to say so he held her and wiped her tears.

xxx

Later, as the whole camp ate together under a purple sunset, some of the men began to consider inviting their families to the camp. The Gate of Winter was approaching and they had grown tired of opening it by themselves.

“It has never felt right, ringing it open without our families here with us” Said Danh, “Not that I didn't appreciate your cooking last year Zaw” he added.

“well why don't we invite them here” Said Kon.

“But where will they stay?”

“They can with us” Said Danh, a glint in his eye.

There was muttering and groaning around the table at the thought of the dormitories being shared by men and women, even married ones.

“Don’t you all start putting out my dream of a Gate with my family this year” Said Danh

“We would never do that” Said Seng Nu. “the camp belongs to you as much as it does to anyone. You can invite whoever you want”

There were sounds of agreement and the voices around the table bubbled and rose and before long they had all arrived at the sweet outcome of the conversation:

Buttersweet would become a village.

“Why not!” said Kon, raising a cup of palm wine in a toast. And long after the moon had swept over the clearing, they were all still awake and dreaming.

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If was as if they had never slept. They had all finally gone to bed late, but were awake early and the excited chatter continued where it left off. There was a determination not to let the new dream fade

It was decided to start the new village in shifts. Half of the men would take half of the elephants out into The Valley to trade for supplies and bring back their families, The rest would stay at the camp.

“And what if your wife doesn’t want to move Danh?” Said Zaw to Danh who was strapping on a saddle to the young bull Japhtu.

“Don’t you go taking me for a bad one young Zaw” Said Danh, reproaching the boy who was almost 15 years younger than him. “Don’t be talking to me about wives when you haven’t even asked Seng Nu to marry you yet.”

Zaw blushed.

“As for my lovely lady, each season I return back to the homestead, she tells me that the roof is leaking and the rats are getting in through the holes. And each time she asks if she can come back with me. So I don’t assume anything Zaw, but I have a guess what her answer will be.”

Zaw nodded, slightly embarrassed to have brought up the subject. But he still wondered if everyone else would have such an easy time convincing their families to move here. He looked over to the house where Seng Nu was talking to Kon and thought that he was lucky to have her right here.

17.

Jhabow had been born on an eastern facing hill where the sun shone bright from the moment it arrived on the horizon. Cautious morning eyes were a habit he had never grown out of, even here in the jungle where the trees shaded the glare and the dawn was a gently lifting light. He always slept standing up, and could go from deep sleep to alert and angry in a matter of seconds if a night predator dared to approach. But nothing had disturbed him that morning and knowing that he had a long day ahead, he allowed himself the luxury of waking up slowly. He felt the light over his thick lids and then let the energy flow along his shoulders and back until it finally reached his tree trunk like feet and he lifted them to shake off the last grains of the night.

Chyarmanine would be back today. How long would they have together? By the afternoon it would be his turn to go out into The Valley and she would stay and help build the new village. Seng Nu has been clearing the forest in order to widen the camp ground and Jhabow had been carrying the dead timber to the men, who then cut it into planks and beams for the new buildings. He allowed his thoughts to turn to gifts that might be coming from the Valley. He closed his eyes again and felt his mouth water at the thought of redcorn cobs from Seesan town and white cherries from The Hillfeet.

“HMMPHHHH!”

Chyar! He turned around to meet her and raised his trunk in delight and responded with a happy trumpet. On her face was a smile that asked “were you thinking of me or food just now, huh?”

Jhabow answered with his trunk, hugging it around hers..

18.

Buttersweet was becoming more than just a work camp for timber. An area twice as large as the original camp had been cleared away, and the foundations of new buildings were being driven into what was once forest floor. At the northern end, the camp was being extended closer to the river, and a channel was being dug so that it might water the crops in new fields. With more people came a need for a source of food year round, and Zaw had taken charge, collecting seeds and drawing up planting rotations. Seng Nu was helping to dig the channel, using her powers to scoop the earth from where it lay. But it was much more strenuous for her than simply plucking an apple or even uprooting a tree and she could not manage more than a few metres a day.

Families had begun arriving too. The sounds of the camp became more lighter and liquid as the voices of women and children joined the gravel of the men. Not all the houses had been built yet, so

the old rest station was turned into a dormitory for arriving women and their babies. While the older children were given a hut of their own for boys and girls, much to their delight. The camp was swelling and though it felt like it was bursting at the seams, it was content. Each new arrival was celebrated and the elephants too had begun to notice there were more people around. They had never seen human children before and the young elephants were happy to make new friends their age, even if the mothers on both sides were a little protective at first.

Xxx

The Gate of Winter had arrived. In previous years, celebrations at the camp had been mostly an excuse for the men to stuff themselves full of hot food and drink sky beer until the early hours of the morning. They would still ring open the gate at midnight, but this was mostly just an interruption inbetween the gluttony.

With the families here, this year was different, and while the mood was no longer gluttonous, it was just as high spirited. Ribbons had been strung up from tree to tree and even some of the elephants were wearing sashes of tied into oversized bows around their necks. There was music too, which had begun to inspire the night's first dancers, the young children who were jumping and spinning in instinctive joy.

As the sun went down, long tables were placed in the open ground by the Big House for the feast. There were no arranged places, people sat where they pleased and many changed places after portions, not because they disliked their neighbours, but because they wanted to share the meal with as many people as possible.

“What are you thinking lad?” Seng Nu called across the table to Jakan who seemed to be lost in his own world.

“Don't you like my cooking?” added Zaw. “You haven't touched the candied sweetpeas”.

Jakan took a sweetpea and popped it in his mouth. “It's delicious Zaw, Do trees die like humans? I mean, if we didn't cut them down would they live forever or would they die of old age like us?”

“That is a question you are too young to be asking” said Danh

“well what question should I be asking Uncle”

“How about if you swallow a melon seed will a melon grow in your stomach?” Said Seng Nu

“Don’t be silly Seng Nu, that a question you are too old to ask” Danh leaned closer across the table to Jakan and spoke in a undertone, just loud enough for only the table to hear. At your age, Son, what you should be asking is should I give her apple or cherry blossom flowers to tie in her hair tonight?”

Jakan frowned in confusion “Who?”

“The girl, who happens to be my niece, sitting on the table next to us. She’s been watching you for a long time and it’s not the sweetpeas I think she’s interested in.”

Jakan couldn’t help but look directly over to the next table. The girl there looked away as he made eye contact with her. Then she looked back.

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“There’s a lady at the gates.”

Sutring was at the table. He was looking at his feet as he spoke to Zaw.

“Well who’s family is she? Why haven’t you taken her to the women’s hut, find her some bedding?”

“She wants to speak to you, Zaw.” Sutring knew whose family she was, but he didn’t want to be the first to say the name out loud.

Zaw frowned. Apart from Seng Nu, the only woman he knew was his mother, and he wasn’t expecting a visit, let alone one so late in the day. He slid on his shoes and walked to the gate where a young woman was standing. Her hair was tied up away into a bun and revealed a slim mango shaped face and two deep pitted eyes that Zaw remembered belonged to someone he had once known. Gum Taw’s daughter.

“Jin Bu?”

“Zaw!” she said and fell forward into his arms with relief. She then lifted her head up and brought her face close to his.

Zaw stepped back, but took her hands to make sure she did not fall over. She had tried to kiss him. Was she drunk? They were around the same age and from the same village and he had known her as

a child, but the way she had said his name seemed to imply a closeness that he had never known. Had Gum Taw sent her? Was this some kind of trick? “Jin Bu, let me take you to the women’s hut. Someone there will help you find a bed. Then you can come open the gates with us later.”

Jin Bu felt herself on the brink of collapse. She had always expected that Zaw would find someone else after she left, the attempted kiss had been a mistake, but she had never imagined that he would not even meet her eyes, to pretend he didn’t know her. Hadn’t they shared things? Hadn’t they made things? She reached around and cradled the bundle that was strapped to her back. It was at that point that Zaw noticed the baby.

“I didn’t notice you had a child with you. Don’t worry we will find you a comfortable place to sleep. Do you need anything for him? Her?”

He was being so nice, just like the Zaw she knew. But it was the polite way he spoke to old ladies and teachers, not the way someone spoke to their lover, foto someone who had been his lover, even if that was over now. Was he drunk? Was this some kind of trick?

She had been sent away to The City by her father to stay with distant relatives of the clan. It was there that she had raised the child, Zaw’s child. She had not known how to contact him, so she had escaped from the house in the City, taking a pouch of jade leaves and leaving a note promising one day to pay them back. She had walked for miles, past the City gates and along the roads by the sweeping fields where she found rides on farmer’s carts, sat among the haybales and chickens. At the nights she found rooms at village inns, and if there wasn’t an inn she laid under the trees with Pansa wrapped into a linen blanket next to her. Along the way she heard whispers and rumour that Buttersweet camp was now under control of a forest witch who killed anyone who stood in her way. She did not believe it, but the closer she came to the forest the more the rumours were confirmed that the camp was no longer under the owned by her father. This confirmed her decision not to go first to her family home in Blackstone. If there had been a dispute then surely he would forbid her from visiting the camp, whether his grandchild’s father lived there or not.

She had rehearsed what she would say to Zaw, how she would tell him about Pansa and imagined the different ways in which he would respond. But it had never gone like this in her head. In something of a daze she allowed him to lead her to one of the long tables and brought her a bowl of gourd leaf soup. She put the spoon to her mouth and it rested there as her mind tried to untangle what was going on Maybe her expectations had been too high? maybe she was the problem? Perhaps he was pretending for some reason, had her father threatened him?

19.

“Is the father here?” said a woman sat across from her, motioning towards the sleeping bundle next to Jin Bu. There were deep lines in her face, and her hair was almost entirely silver, but her face was full of cheer and sunshine.

“I’m Jalin, my Danh works here, he brought me up from Whetstone village last week. I’m not going to lie and say that it’s comfortable but I’m sure it will be once the houses are built. I won’t be riding one of those beasts though!” she said and with a tilt of her head indicated the elephants who were munching their own breakfasts of bamboo and sugar cane.

Jalin carried on talking and Jin Bu nodded and assented but was also watching Zaw, who was at the cooking area, ladling out thick steaming soup. She also noticed there was a girl near him. She was very close to him, and sprinkling herbs on each bowl of soup before they were sent out and when there was a break in the service she would hug him, a blissful smile on her face, her hair the colour of flames in the sunlight.

She had heard of this girl on the road to Bittersweet. Seng Nu. The one they said could kill men with just a wink of her eye. Who could change the colour of the sky. The one who had her arm clasped around Zaw’s waist. Like a snake.

She picked up Pansa and moved quickly through the breakfast tables to the front of the house.

She looked at Zaw, her eyes confrontational “You don’t remember me, do you?” She was trying to keep her voice calm, but it wavered like a solitary leaf on a high branch.

Zaw continued to spoon out spoonfuls of vine leaf soup “I do remember you Jin Bu. We were friends in Blackstone, we grew up together”. He was not attuned to her rhythm and did not see her current fragility. She was just a friend from that grey era of childhood, one that had confused some forgotten moment in the past for something more.

Pansa woke up and begun to make hungry sounds so Jin Bu rocked her in her arms, trying not to cry herself “Yes, we were friends Zaw, but we were more than that too. Don’t you remember? We told each other our secrets, we made plans together.”

Zaw was silent, as he felt it was the only polite thing to do in a situation where you are confronted by someone with a delusion so strong.

Jin Bu remained standing. “You still walk with a slight limp, don’t you remember how you got it? You saved me from an elephant in the forest.”

Zaw put the ladle down and his raised his eyes to the sky as he tried to remember. Seng Nu had saved him, she had brought him back to the camp. But why was he in the forest searching for a

rampaging elephant in the first place? It was like when the detail of a dream fades out leaving nothing but the knowledge that something had been there.

Some people were grumbling about the hold up with the soup. Zaw did not hear them. Jin Bu had got his attention, but had not convinced him. How could he forget a person? Why would he forget a person? He did his best to smile at her with sympathy, but made sure there was no warmth in his face, so as not to encourage the delusion. “Jin Bu, I’m sorry...”

“Don’t say sorry to me, apologise to your daughter” said Jin Bu, in a small voice that was almost drained of all hope. She lifted the sleeping child up to him, but he did not take her. So she turned and walked away. She would go back to The City and raise Pansa herself. She could not reason with magic.

Zaw was stunned. It did not make sense. Seng Nu had been standing next to them the whole time and he turned to her to deny what had become an accusation. “Seng Nu, I don’t understand. You are the only one I have ever been with...” he said.

And then he noticed that her eyes were red.

“What’s going on?” he said, putting an arm around her, but she wrapped it and stepped back, letting her arms slide down down his until the fingers met and let go. “Go to her” she said. “Make sure she is alright”.

“I don’t understand Seng Nu, you don’t believe her do you? I knew he when we were children, I haven’t seen her in years. She is crazy.”

“Then go make sure she doesn’t hurt herself. Please Zaw.” Seng Nu did not make eye contact. She was keeping an earlier memory of Zaw’s face in her mind.

Zaw took his apron off and walked across the camp towards the women’s hut. Seng Nu watched him wondering why she had told him to follow her. She could have just agreed she was crazy and watched her walk out of their lives again.

20.

The door to the women’s hut was closed and Zaw gave a hesitant knock. There was no answer, but he could hear sobbing from inside. He spoke to the door. “Look, is there anything I can do? I’m sorry I don’t remember you...are you sure you haven’t confused me with someone else?”

The door swung open and Jin Bu was there, her eyes fierce and red. “No I haven’t confused you with someone else!” Pansa, who had been napping on a bed behind her, woke up startled and began sucking in the nearby air in preparation to bawl.

A young woman named Pita who was staying in the hut too, picked her up. She had the same coarse straw hair as her brother Sutring. “Come on little one, let’s go look at the Elephants with all their fancy bows on tonight!” she said and then glanced at Jin Bu, who nodded her permission.

Zaw was still standing awkwardly by the door as she walked past him with Pansa in her arms.

Jin Bu frowned and then looked around the room to check they were alone. “Is my father threatening you? You can tell me the truth now.”

Zaw did not react to that so she changed course, speaking softly and reaching out a hand to place on his chest. She looked up at him, hoping to catch him in her eyes which were wide and hopeful and smoked like new embers. It was a last desperate attempt to make him remember. “Don’t you remember our last day? You told me I tasted like bananas” Jin Bu even allowed herself a faint smile at the memory that was clear to her and lost to Zaw.

Zaw twitched as Jin Bu’s fingers traced a slow line down his stomach.

“Don’t you remember Tairu Zaw? That was the day we made love in the forest. I would have told you, but I didn’t know until I was in the city. I brought Pansa here to see you. She’s your daughter Zaw”.

“She’s not my daughter.” Zaw stepped back pushing her hands away. He had a look not of anger, but of pity. For he was sure that this young mother had lost her mind.

Jin Bu saw that look and the softness in her washed away like dust in a rainstorm. She screamed at Zaw, which did nothing to dissuade him from his conclusion. Sadness wrapped in anger came flying out her body in loud anguished sounds. She swung her hands and whatever they touched she picked up and threw. Zaw did not leave, but simply stood there with his hands raised, apologetically batting away the pillows, bags and chair legs that came flying towards him.

“What has she done to you!?” yelled Jin Bu, finally finding words for her anger and accusation. Now she had reached a bookshelf and she launched books at Zaw from across the room, their pages fluttering open like pigeons.

Seng Nu was leaning against the outer porch of the house. The sun was setting in the west and while they waited for the full moon to appear over the eastern mountains, lanterns were lit. In front of her the camp was buzzing with anticipation for the Gates. Some of the children had already taken their bells out from their pockets and bags and there was a smattering of ringing and chiming as the more impatient of the younglings tested out the sound. Cheers went up as the carpenters brought out the huge wooden chimes to be attached around the elephant's necks and Pinkwetha was pushing his way to the front of the line to be the first to get a bell.

The lanterns became shimmering rivers of gold as Seng Nu began to silently cry.

Her stomach was like a knot tying and untying itself. What would she tell him? Would he remember? Would he still love her? Would he leave her now? She should never have agreed to the memory spell. It had been foolish impatience. Zaw would have grown to love her in his own time. But their love was born in a lie, even if it was his wish at the time. She had the strong urge to run to him, to apologize, to beg him for forgiveness. He would take her back, wouldn't he? But there was a child now. And that child's father didn't even recognise himself. She felt envy, saw it in her mind like spiked thorns of an unnatural blue colour.

"You are thinking of the baby" said Kon, interrupting her thoughts. He was speaking in a quiet voice so only the two of them could hear. "You want her to meet her father at least once before she goes."

Seng Nu gave a small nod "Will she go?" she said, knowing that neither of them knew the answer.

"Gum Taw's daughter." Said Kon. "Zaw went into the forest to save her. And now, he doesn't even know her." He looked at Seng Nu, but she could not read his face.

"He asked me to do it". Said Seng Nu, in a voice that was equal parts protest and regret.

"I don't doubt that." Said Kon. "but now you feel guilty."

"Are you going to tell him?"

Kon paused. He knew Seng Nu was not threatening him. He looked in her eyes and saw only the forlorn little sparrow that had arrived to the camp a year previously.

"No." he said.

“Why did my mother leave me?” asked Seng Nu.

Kon took a breath and looked out to the east.

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Something small and red spilled out onto the floor as a book bounced off Zaw’s forearm. There was nothing left to throw and Jin Bu was now sobbing on the floor. Zaw knelt down and picked up the red thing.

It was a flower, preserved and flattened between the pages of the book. He had put it there a year ago, folded between the sheets of paper. He remembered that. A red jasmine. Blood red. Her blood. Jin Bu.

“You were here?” His mind was like a hand in a basket of grain, pushing and searching in the dark for another to hold. “When I was injured, you were here with me?”

Jin Bu lifted her hands, her palms facing Zaw. There was a faint pink scar running across each one. “I was holding so tight to the tree that day. And then I held your hand just as tight when I thought you might leave.”

She walked over to him and took the red jasmine in her fingers. “You always brought me flowers.”

He remembers the blood jasmine flowers and the enchantment they were used for. He pulls on the vine and the canopy comes crashing down around him.

He remembers the feel of her hand in a basket of grain. He remembers the scent of the morning cut jasmine he would leave by her window, then the days in the forest by the apple tree near the patches of gourd leaf that was sweet in the spring. He remembers looking into her eyes, and her looking into his. Just like she was doing now.

He felt his own blood rushing around his body like a river running in the rain. “I’m so sorry.” He looked at Jin Bu with his old eyes of love. “You’re not a dream are you?”

Jin Bu smiled wider than she had in a full year. She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him. “It’s fine. You were under the spell of that girl. It wasn’t your fault. She tricked you.”

But Zaw also remembered that it was he who had asked Seng Nu to make him forget. He would tell her that later. He loved Jin Bu, but he loved Seng Nu too. He hugged Jin Bu and breathed her in.

“You still smell like bananas you know. Is that all you eat?” he said with a smile he wore only for her.

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Kon did not think to question how Seng Nu knew that he knew these things, but instead set his mind on the task of how to tell her in the most gentle way possible. “She did not abandon you Seng Nu. No. She left after you were born.” He looked to the mountains in the east where a white halo was forming.

“Where did she go?” said Seng Nu.

“She did not go anywhere. She left. I’m sorry.” Kon was unwilling to speak more clearly and he cursed himself for his cowardice.

Seng Nu understood. She felt prickly all over as the tiny candle of hope flickered inside her and went out. Her voice wobbled. “And my father?”

Kon still could not look Seng Nu in the eyes. Was truth always the highest? He had spent the last eighteen years trying to forget what had happened on the Mountain. He did not want to retell it, not least to the one person who was still unscarred by it. Knowing who her father was would not make her stronger. He had let Seng Nu down before. At the Battle of the Gate, he had watched while she killed those men. He had done nothing but watch as she killed those men and saved Buttersweet for everyone. It wasn’t fair that one girl had to carry that burden.

“I do not know.”

But that wasn’t good enough for Seng Nu. She knew Kon knew more. She would keep asking until he told her the truth. That was all she wanted. The truth would not hurt her. She knew he was struggling against something, something that was holding her back, as if he was trying to protect her. But she didn’t need protection. She was strong enough for anything. She took a breath.

How could she ask for the truth when she herself would not give it to Zaw and Jin Bu?

Zaw asked you.

He had wanted it. He asked for it, followed her through the rain to receive it.

Only after you told him you could.

A tear ran down Seng Nu's cheek and her hands balled up into fists that fell apart as soon as she had made them. What she had with Zaw was love. And love does not wash away like dust in the river. Not that quickly.

But she knew it would have to eventually.

“SENG NU!”

She wiped her tears and made her face rigid before she turned around to face the world.

“Seng Nu!”

Sutring was running from the southern gate across the camp. Even from far away she could see his eyes were wide and panicked.

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Jin Bu playfully hit Zaw “..and you smell like a sweaty kitchen! I can't believe you became a cook, Zaw! I thought you wanted to be an oozie?”

Zaw shrugged “My leg...”

“I'm sorry...I guess it was my fault in a way, getting in the way of that elephant”

“No it was my fault for thinking I could outrun Pinkwetha. I enjoy cooking, we're planting a vegetable garden next to the house...”

Zaw's words trailed as he realised that the house in question was the one he shared with Seng Nu. He would have to leave her. Would he? He thought about Seng Nu, growing old by herself. But then he thought about Jin Bu, growing old too. She had a child to look after.

Jin Bu had a child who would look after her. Did that mean he should choose Seng Nu instead? What about the baby? His baby. It was a weird sensation, as if the new knowledge itself had taken form and brushed itself across the hairs on his neck.

“My daughter...”

“Her name is Pansa. She has a big nose like you” Said Jin Bu and gripped Zaw’s nose between her thumb and forefinger. “Shall I introduce you?”

“I would love that” said Zaw. And right there he had made up his mind. He felt guilt to abandon Seng Nu, and that feeling was itself proof that he truly loved her. But he could not love two at once just as a river cannot go run split into two and claim to be the same river.

Somewhere there was another Zaw, who was a river that ran on the other side of that fork. But it was not here and not then. He embraced Jin Bu.

He let go, haunted by an old ghost. “Your father...”

Jin Bu answered in the manner of someone who had rehearsed. “I have just made my way here from the City on foot, nursing a baby. I can deal with him. If he doesn’t like us, then we will leave him and form our own clan! Our future does not belong to him. We are like birds now Zaw.”

And they looked in each others eyes again, because for each moment that they did, they were lost for what felt like a lifetime.

There was a whistling sound in the air above the hut.

21.

Fire! Fire! The camp was on fire!

Chyarmanine passed rows of flaming huts as she ran to the north of the camp looking for a way out. There was a gap next to the big house where the men had been planting seeds and she galloped towards it. Then there was a whistle and a boom as huge ball of fire fell crashing out of the sky to land in front of her. Chyarmine skidded and fell as the ball exploded in a wall of searing, blistering flames, she screamed in pain as sparks and large embers dashed themselves against her skin, which was thick, but still felt fire.

The ball of fire were smashing into buildings and crushing the roofs as they hit, where they hit the ground they burst and sent out flames in all directions, setting fire to anything they touched and throttling the camp with their ground shaking weight.

The moon was now high above the eastern mountains, but the Gates of Winter were not being opened. Instead of the harmony of hundred of bells being rang at once, there was discordant screaming and wailing and the sad mutred sound of bells hitting the dirt as people ran to escape the fireballs.

It was Gum Taw and he broken the Gates.

Chyarmanine turned back, trying to forget the pain that was coming from the blistered skin on her trunk and forehead. She ran back down the camp to the elephant stables but they were on fire too. She wailed a trumpet of frustration and was about to turn back again when she heard a response from the other side of the stables.

Jhabow!

She cried back to him and he called back. But there was no way around past the fire. She stepped back as the flames grew larger, but felt heat on her back. One of the flaming beams had fallen, dragging down an entire wall of the stables which now burned, penning her in tight. She felt the heat on her skin. Even if the flames did not burn her the heat would take her. She knelt down in the dirt while the fires rose around her, giving one last call for Jhabow to run to safety.

Jhabow charged through the flaming stable walls to save her. He pushed with his forehead and shovelling with his tusks as the fire burnt him, but he did not care. He wrapped his trunk under Chyarmanine and lifted her to his feet and then got behind her, pushing her through the gap to the safety of the jungle. They vowed wordlessly never to return.

22.

When Sutring told her that Gum Taw had returned, Seng Nu sighed in frustration at his stubbornness. Hadn't he learned from last time? Sutring said that he had brought a carts with him and he was setting the carts on fire.

Seng Nu frowned, but did not have time to hold the expression, as the fireballs began to rain down. She yelled for them to bring water, but it was clear it would be too late. No one knew what to do. Everyone was looking at her. Their eyes pleading with her to do something.

More and more buildings were going up in flames. "Seng Nu!" they shouted "Stop it!" "Do something!" "Save us!"

She did not feel anger, just despair. She would not kill again.

“Run” she screamed at the men and women around her. They looked at her in confusion. Why was she not doing anything? She felt her voice rise, “Run!” And they ran. She ran too. Into the big house, and onto the balcony to release all the doves. They flew up into the sky out of the reach of flames and smoke, away above the forest, leaving behind the smouldering anthill that was Buttersweet.

Seng Nu looked out from the balcony. Nearly half of the buildings were in flames and some had already collapsed in on themselves. On the other side she sees that the women’s dormitory is now just a bonfire.

Seng Nu is outside and she is running towards the gate. She knows she is making a sound- a simmering scream of fear and anger- but all she can hear is the blood crashing like a raging wave inside her. She runs across the camp, past the burning buildings, past the running people, shouting in pain and in fear and already mourning the dead. Past the chaos and the confusion. The front gate has been torn apart and she sees Gum Taw and his army on the other side. They are not coming through yet, they are still loading their machines that launch balls of fire and she realises that he does not want to come in he wants to destroy. She feels her own rage rising up to meet his. She will destroy him. She will destroy all of them. She is running towards them, her body is a fist of vengeance. She is about to leap into the air when she hears a wail behind her, she turns, but only in time to see a flash of grey that knocks her down and she hits the ground hard.

23.

Pinkwetha found her lying in the vegetable patch by the front gate. His nose was full of smoke and soot, but he could still know where to find Seng Nu. She smelled of apples. He poked her body with his trunk and she opened her eyes and reached up a hand so he could pull her to her feet. She groaned as she stood, her arms, legs, everything ached and felt weak. She felt like an empty cup or a dry riverbed.

She stumbled through what had once been the gate, but now was splinters. The wooden machines, the ones that had thrown the fireballs, were all smashed and the ground was scorched black.

It had been Kon who had been riding Pinkwetha. They had taken her rage for their own. Protecting her from deadly actions and taking the responsibility for themselves. Kon had been the eyes and Pinkwetha the body. And then they had both fought.

Pinkwetha made a low whining sound. Though he could not see, neither could he sense Kon’s presence in the forest anymore.

Seng Nu understood. Kon had gone but he had taken Gum Taw with him. The wind was whistling through the forest like a funeral song.

Seng Nu could see either of them, but she knew from the pitch of the wind whistling through the forest that it had been a grave this day.

She looked over Pinkwetha's body as he stood silently in mourning for Kon. There were a few black burn marks from the fire as well as gashes and cuts, made from axes arrows and sword tips, but none had pierced too deeply into his thick grey hide.

Pinkwetha lifted her up and placed her on his back. She gave him a nudge with her hand and he carried her back into the camp. He turned to the right, past the smouldering remains of the stables and then to what had once been the rest station. It had been the first place that had been hit. The fireball had gone through the roof and set fire to the place in an instant.

Tears began to roll down her cheek. "Zaw..." There would be no answer from the ashes, now and forever. She grieved for Jin Bu too. The jealousy was gone now, though she would take it back if she could, if it brought both of them back. She remembered the baby and wept harder still.

They went on. Small fires still burned in places, but would have been pointless to put them out. One of the timber stores had collapsed and the logs lay scattered on the ground half charred. There was a body of a young girl, who seemed to have been crushed under the falling logs. It was Sutring's sister. Seng Nu remembered her name was Pita. And next to her was a baby, quite unharmed. Pinkwetha wrapped his gentle trunk around it and lifted up the sleeping infant. Seng Nu's arms still ached, but she found the strength to take her and in that moment made a promise.

Pinkwetha carried them back to what had been the big house, but was just a pile of black smoking wood. Seng Nu picked up one of the few unburnt shards and poked around for a keepsake.

Men and women had begun to stumble back into the camp from the forest like ashes falling into a pond. Their faces were black with soot and their eyes were stained red from either smoke or tears. They formed a loose circle around Seng Nu, waiting for her to speak. Jakan and Sutring were there, their bodies were dazed but their eyes were wide and anxious, as if tomorrow was hope's last chance. Danh and Jalin were also nearby, holding each others hands like young lovers.

Seng Nu saw the wooden huts rebuilding themselves, saw the families return and the fields in the forest giving life. She saw generations growing old and becoming young under the awnings. Without greed or power. She saw the town growing, not against the forest but within in, even as the wood turned to stone and the buildings rose higher. Great spires sprouted from the earth, and they rose up to the sky like giant oaks of stone, piercing the canopy to become beacons, for the whole Valley. Here we are. We are safe.

She knew that everyone else saw the city too. They saw the rows of houses set like low flowers in a grove, the musty fresh scent of new polished wood and bales of cut straw. The sound of the stone masons carving the beacons block by block.

But she also saw that it was a knot they were waiting for her to untie.

She turned her head and waited to hear what Zaw would say. But he was not there to say anything. Every time she forgot this, the memory returned like a spear in her side.

She would not stay here, but would leave, retreat like the leaves of the fingercurl plant. And the City in the Forest would remain a dream, for now at least.

Yet the dream was not over, because nothing ever ended.

And the men and women of the dream would scatter back into The Valley. But as seeds.

24. Epilogue

The sound of the rain drumming against the roof of the cottage was both heavy and relaxing. Seng Nu and Pansa were sitting under the awnings watching the season arrive.

Pansa sat up and nodded as if to herself, but then turned to Seng Nu. “Auntie Chyar and Uncle Jhabow are coming.”

Seng Nu listened for the telltale footsteps but heard nothing.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes Auntie, Now they are at the river, but they are coming to visit this afternoon”

“How do you know that?” asked Seng Nu, but Pansa just shrugged. Seng Nu gave her a look and then chuckled to herself. Pansa was only 5 years old, the age when children begin to show glimpses of the adult they will be. She had already learnt to talk to the forest.

When she was older she would be able to stop the rain.

Later that evening, sure enough Chyar and Jhabow arrived and they picked up Pansa and passed her from trunk to trunk as she squealed in delight.

“Why do Auntie Chyar and Uncle Jhabow have those pinkyblack marks on their faces?” asked Pansa as Seng Nu put her to bed.

“There was a big fire and they had to go through it to escape”.

“why didn’t they go around it?”

“The fire was everywhere.”

“Was I there?”

“Time for bed Pansa.” She would tell her the truth. In time.

“Is that when you found me?” said Pansa, her eyes were already closing.

“I found you in a peapod sitting on a vine”.